The Dragon of Nimh by TyrakatheDragonFan

Fandoms: Spyro the Dragon (Video Games 1998-2005), The Secret of NIMH (1982), Monster Hunter (Video Games), The Legend of Spyro (Video Games 2006-2009), An American Tail (Movies), Watership Down - Richard Adams, Once Upon a Forest (1993), Silverwing - Kenneth Oppel, The Saga Of Spyro (Original Fandom), Warhammer Fantasy, Dungeons & Dragons (Roleplaying Game)

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2023-10-29

Updated: 2025-12-25

Chapters: 21/?

Words: 141365

Additional tags: Fantasy, Adventure, Alternate Universe - Medieval, Alternate Universe - Fantasy, Alternate Universe - Magic, Spyro is a Safi'jiiva, Spyro is a True Dragon, Zoe is a True Fae, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Trauma, War, Scars, Period-Typical Racism, Period-Typical Sexism, Blood and Violence

Categories: F/M

Rating: Mature

Series: The Saga of Spyro 1

Summary:

His birth foretold the coming of a new age; a beast born once every ten generations, whose power would change the course of history itself. Worshiped as a god by some, feared as a demon by others, the fate of all of

Nimh would rest in its claws...but even the mightiest of titans need the love of a mother, even if it's from the most unexpected of creatures.

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Chapter 1: The Dragon of Nimh: Cover

Chapter Text

Chapter 2: Prologue: Birth of a Legend

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Chapter Text

Warmth and Darkness.

That was all he knew. No concept of the flow of time. No awareness of his own existence. Nothing...nothing but the warmth he floated in, and the darkness that surrounded him. It was all he had ever known.

It was all he had ever needed.

Suspended in his timeless world, he slept deeply. His eyes had never once opened, and his lungs had never once taken a breath of air, yet his heartbeat all the same; said beating was the only sound he ever knew, the blood flowing to and from his body. He hardly ever moved, content to float in his warm little world, though sometimes he did: a small flex of his clawed toes, a flick of his spine-covered tail, or a twitch of the fingers of his wings. Nothing more than the sleeping jerks of a dreaming creature.

Did he dream? Yes, though to say the dreams were truly his would be a lie. Rather than brought forth by the mind and experiences of life, his dreams came to him from deep within the blood flowing through his veins. Dreams of thousands upon thousands of years' worth of other lives before his own. Dreams of endless light and color, beautiful beyond description. Of a great orange fury that devoured everything in its path, spilling out from within. Of wide expanses of golden things and glimmering shines of a hundred colors. Of wings, tails, and orange fury clashing above, roars of fury shaking the space around them as they did so.

All things he did not recognize. Did not know. And yet, at the same time, all felt so familiar to him.

Not that he cared. Or even had the ability to care. Apart from his dreams, this existence was all he knew. And as far as he could be concerned, all he wanted and needed.

But things began to change. His little world was growing smaller and smaller around him, and the warmth was beginning to fade. His body began to fill up the world around him, the edges of existence beginning to brush against his body. He ignored it at first, simply curling up even tighter on himself and continuing to sleep. But his world continued to shrink, and he could only curl up so much.

Then, without warning, the world could shrink no more, and his body filled it up entirely.

His scaly skin pressed against the hard edges of his existence, his limbs tucked up into themselves as far as they could, his tail wrapping up past his head and against his back, while said head was forced down near his stomach. The warmth was all but gone now, little more than a tiny flicker right below his belly, leaving the rest of his world dark without it.

Then he shifted again in his sleep, and this time...everything *exploded*.

The sensation of his skin brushing against the edges of the world fired off the thousands of nerves at the hard yet smooth touch, sending a fury of electric signals coursing through his body and into his head, where they erupted into a brilliant, overwhelming rush of sensation. His chest tightened and burned as something within it struggled to...gain something. A gnawing bite hit inside his belly as the very last bits of the warmth were sucked away, leaving a deep, gnawing in its place. The blurry dreams faded from his mind as it was lit up with the rush of a thousand bolts of lightning, the sensations of touch and pain kicking it into overdrive.

His eyes opened for the first time.

He was awake.

He was aware.

And he was *dying*.

The pain of his chest spiked, and it all came rushing in at once: Kick. Claw. Push. Escape. Get Out! Still recoiling from the shock from experiencing consciousness for the first time, his body moved on its own; his legs kicked against the edge of the world. His wings tried to unfurl, pushing against the hard, smooth walls around him. He jerked his head forward at the curved surface in front of him, striking at it in desperate instinct. His movements were weak at first, but quickly grew stronger as his mind adjusted to all the sensations, and his actions became deliberate rather than instinctive.

He had to get out. He had to escape his once warm world. He couldn't sleep anymore; there was no warmth left. Somehow, he knew that if he fell asleep again, he wouldn't be here anymore.

Another shove of his head and the edge of the world caved outwards; the sensation of sound was learned as a sticky squishing noise burst around him, and the sensation of sight was painfully introduced the form of bright light piercing through the cracks, stabbing into his newly opened eyes. Said eyes snapped shut in pain and his throat clenched as he tried to do...*something*, but nothing happened; he tried to push something out. To tell of his distress. But there was nothing to push; his lungs were burning by this point, desperate for something that only existed outside the world. He slammed against the edge, again and again, each blow forcing the cracks to spread out further with each blow, throwing his full weight into it. Time finally had meaning to him, and he was quickly running out of what little he had.

Finally, with a loud, wet crack, the world split wide open, and he tumbled outwards in a slimy mess onto a cold, hard floor.

Something invisible smacked into his wriggling, kicking form with a biting cold. Instinct took over again, and he sucked in a deep breath; the invisible thing, cold and stale, rushed down his throat and filled his lungs, purging his chest of its tightness and sending fresh oxygen throughout his body. His brain flared to life as the rich chemicals flowed into it, flooding him with another rush of overwhelming sensations. In pain from the tumble, covered in the cold, sticky remains of his former world, and consumed with a

longing emptiness throughout his torso, he was finally able to do what he had been trying ever since he had woken up:

He opened his jaws and *screamed*.

And thus, from within a solitary cave formed in the foot of a mountain, the world of Tamrizeroth was subjected to a sound that it had not heard for eons: the cry of a newly-hatched Aetherian Safi'jiiva, also known as a Purple Dragon, wailing like a banshee into the night sky.

Notes:

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This fanfic was partially inspired by NIMH: Planet of the Rats, written by Sharks Potter. Credit to elements and scenes that share similarities to his story is given to this really good read; one I highly recommend to anyone who loves The Secret of NIHM/An American Tail (though a warning for violent and disturbing content is advised).

Chapter 3: Heart of the Forest

Chapter Text

This cave wasn't anything extraordinary.

The continent was filled with dozens of cavern systems, some stretching for hundreds of miles beneath the surface of the planet; they came in all shapes and sizes and were filled with unique wonders and riches of all dreams and imaginations. Compared to most, this single-mouthed cave was hardly anything special; no bigger than the average house in size, it was almost laughably small, with the entrance fully visible from the very back. The inside of the cavern had no distinguishing features to set it apart from any other; stalactites hung sparely across the roof and stalagmites poked up here and there from the rocky, uneven floor, which rose at the back of the cave before sloping down towards the middle and coming back up on an incline to the entrance.

The life in the cave was nothing out of the ordinary for this world, either: the walls and ceiling shimmered with bio-luminescent algae, ropes of glowing pink moss hanging from the ceiling or slithering down stalactites in vein-like growths. Large, glowing mushrooms of a bright blue color grew at the bases of the stalagmites.

Large, firefly-like insects fluttered aimlessly about the cavern air, their glowing gold abdomens blinking on and off in patterns at each other. A fat, six-legged salamander the size of a Labrador dragged its slimy mass across the floor, content to simply meander along, the bright red and purple markings streaking across its black skin more than enough of a warning to all potential predators. Small horned rodents chattered and scampered about, hastily gobbling up anything they could find to eat while remaining constantly on guard against any predators.

All in all, a very small, very unremarkable cave.

Which made it all the more amazing that it would be the birthplace of the first elder dragon this world had seen for thousands of years.

The newly-born Safi'jiiva laid on the floor in the back of the cave, trembling in a puddle of yolk and embryonic fluids as he took his very first breaths of life. The experience of being born was a traumatic one and he was still reeling from it all; from being forced out of his simple existence of sleeping in his warm, dark egg and thrown out into a massive, freezing world full of sight, sound, smells, and touch. The sensations bombarding his brain were overwhelming, leaving him to whimper and thrash in place, his muscles still adjusting to being used for the first time.

He kicked his hind legs in instinct, pushing himself out of the lower half of the egg he was still partially in, the shiny amethyst shell falling apart and allowing the reptile to unravel his body from his confines. Then he fell still, breathing heavily with exhaustion, as his body tried to accustom itself to the newfound suffering that was life, and the desperation to survive despite it. Another wailing shriek escaped his throat as he thrashed in place, legs kicking the air and wings slapping against the stone floor of the cave with sticky splashes of yolk.

In his throes, he lifted his tail and slammed it against the ground: a loud ***CRACK*** boomed throughout the cavern as the blow broke the very rock beneath it, the walls shaking as the crack split outwards across the floor from the impact spot.

The cave came alive as hundreds of bats were violently disturbed, spilling out into the moonlit night as a panicking flurry of wings, fur, and shrieks. The high-pitched screams continued for several minutes until every last bat had escaped, leaving their former roost as silent as the grave.

At this point, the wyrmling was in a state of shock, lying as still as the stone around him, only his heavy breathing to show that it was still alive.

Then, after what felt like an eternity, another sound broke the silence. Flapping like those of the bats' wings, but much faster and lighter, almost papery in quality. And accompanying the sound was a soft green light, dim and distant at first, but growing brighter as the fluttering got closer, bright

enough to where it shone through the dragon's eyelids, causing him to moan in pain.

For the second time in his new life, he weakly opened his eyes a crack, barely able to make out the blurry image of a glowing humanoid figure of green, surrounded on either side by flickering waves of brilliant lime-green light.

Of all the cities of the Fair Folk on the Continent of Nimh, Avalon was by far the largest and the grandest. Located deep within Feywild Forest, far to the north-west of the Rodentkin Lands, it was a kingdom born from nature itself.

All the structures within its grounds, from the humblest of mushroom-cap huts of the tiny pixies to the mighty oak castle of King Oberon himself, was formed from trees, plants, fungi, and all other manner of purely natural things, not a single piece of metal to be seen anywhere. It was a city whose streets rose and fell with the land, weaving in and out amongst the trees, rather than being carved out of it. Great trees the size of buildings, towering over the rest of the forest, were the dwellings of the larger races of fair folk while giant mushrooms served the same for the smaller kinds, their interiors grown hollow and used for housing. Luminescent flowers of numerous colors lined the smoothed-dirt streets, while tall stalks with glowing seeds served to light the city during the night.

A large river flowed through the middle of the city, but the fairies had built about it, with numerous bridges and pathways leading over it rather than blocking it off, including a large stone standing in the center of the city, smoothed into a flat surface and set up as the main square; shops and market stalls lined the edge of the square, and a giant jade crystal formation grew from the middle of the stone, bearing a crude resemblance of a dragon in mid-takeoff, serving as a natural landmark of the city.

And out of all the trees in this mystical city of magic, it was the Royal Palace of King Oberon that was the most impressive. The main tree of the palace was easily the largest in the entire forest, standing twice as tall as the rest of the city and towering over the canopy, allowing those in the upper

floors to look over the sea of leaves. Its branches stretched far over the city, large and strong enough to hold other sections of the castle in their grasp, as well as providing the city protection from the elements (namely the incredibly harsh winters Nimh was known for) and light in the forms of many large crystal shards that hung from them via thick vines, glowing with a soft sunny light.

From the balcony of the king's private study, which was located about halfway up the main palace tree on its western side, it was one of the most beautiful views in all the world. Especially on a cloudless night like this one, the entire galaxy visible across a sky free from the artificial lights of mortal steel.

A perfect night to enjoy a glass of one's favorite nectar and basking in the bliss and pride of one's beautiful home.

King Oberon leaned back in his chair as he took a sip from the amber-forged glass he held in his left hand, taking a moment to savor the rich deliciousness of the flower-and-bee-brewed beverage; the honeycombs had done very well this year's spring, the pollen of the kingdom's numerous fields harvested and mixed into honey far sweeter than any man-made beehive. Once finished, he turned back to the large book he had propped up on his lap, using his right hand to turn to the next page as he idly swirled his drink while reading; his chair had been turned away from the large oak desk covered in paperwork, tomes, and other duties that he would deal with tomorrow, now facing the massive glass doors that opened out to the balcony itself, allowing the cool night breeze to flow into his usually stuffy study.

He smiled as he spared a moment from his reading to gaze at the amazing sight before him, the twin moons of Zella and Adrano casting their beautiful green and orange glows across his forest; tonight, he was taking a well-earned break from his duties as the King of all Fair Folk and enjoying a good book and a bit of stargazing. It was too perfect a night not to, and even a king was entitled to a break every now and then.

Taller than a full grown-man when standing, King Oberon was an Eladrin; also known as 'Light Fae' or 'Sun Fae', they were largest and most powerful

of all the human-bodied fairies, so much so that they were often mistaken for elves, and could disguise themselves in the human world as long they kept their long elven ears and moth-like antennae hidden from view and didn't draw too much attention to their shining golden hair, bronze-colored skin, and piercing eyes of otherworldly power. And Oberon himself was a prime specimen of his race; tall, intimidating yet handsome, with sharp emerald-colored eyes that could stare into your very soul and judge your worth. His long, flowing hair hung past his shoulders, with a pair of long locks that framed his almost cat-like face all the way down to his collar bone. Part of his right ear was missing, the scarred edge torn and jagged where it had been ripped off; an ancient memory of a past that felt so long ago, before he became King.

Or "last day as a free man, even before you're married", as an old friend of his had cheekily put it once upon a different time.

He smirked fondly at the memory; his friend couldn't have been closer to the truth. He barely remembered what life was like before his father's crown had been placed on his head; it was as if the following morning, he went from being the dashing, handsome prince of adventure and spirit to...well...his father.

The burdens of ruling an entire kingdom were not those easily carried by any means, and it being a kingdom of the magical, mischievous, and trouble-making Fae didn't make things any easier. Between the constant squabbling between all the different fair folk races, the rising tension with the Rodentkin, and the growing rumors that a certain *threat* was going to return, the weight of his crown (as well as the already-massive pile of paperwork) felt ten times heavier.

Well, even the busiest of kings were entitled to a break every now and then, and right now he didn't care what kind of work there was still left to do. He was long overdue for this much-deserved rest, and it was far too beautiful a night not to take it. So he swapped out his ornate royal robes for comfortable evening ones and promptly locked himself away in his study, with only a good book and a relaxing glass of nectar for company.

The Council's petty conflicts could wait until tomorrow. Right now, this was his time, and he was planning to enjoy it to its fullest.

BANG!* *BANG!* *BANG!

So one can imagine he wasn't too pleased when the silence was shattered by a loud knocking against the study's large oak doors, as if whoever was doing so was using a large club or war-hammer to do it.

He closed his eyes and sighed deeply through his nostrils, snapping his book shut with the hand he was using to hold it; and just when was starting to relax...

With a loud creaking of wood, the study doors slowly opened to reveal the ones pushing them to be two large Treant guards adorned in crystalline armor; the elephant-sized living trees were an intimidating sight on their own, but adorned in the crystal-carved armor of the royal guard they were a sight that would terrify any enemy of the forest.

"Get away from my trees!" The one to the left of the doorway boomed, his deep gruff voice filled with the sound of creaking and snapping wood, caused by the movement of its mouth.

Oberon had to fight the urge to roll his eyes; Treant vocabulary was strictly limited to any iteration of 'warning trespassing humans to stay away from the trees' that they fiercely protected, like a dragon guarding its treasure. He wasn’t even sure why anymore; there hadn't been a human on Nimh for thousands of years, and the Rodentkin respected nature as much as the Fair Folk did. Old habits die hard, he guessed, and until they decided to drop said habit, it was a matter of knowing the tricks of understanding what they truly mean; little audio ques, range changes, and so on between the never-changing words.

He turned his chair back around so that he was facing the study again, placing his chalice and book on the side of the desk before resting his hands on its polished surface.

"I'm going to assume the matter at hand is of great enough importance to defy my request for no disturbances." He stated bluntly, crossing his hands together with inter-lacing fingers, one of which tapped impatiently against the knuckle of the other hand.

"Get away from my trees!" The Treant repeated in the same tone. ***"The Forest is not yours to destroy!"***

The eladrin cocked an eyebrow at that; the Thorn Patrols? They didn't report back from their nightly rounds until midnight, and even then, it was with the captain of the guard.

It must've been something extremely important to bring it directly to the king himself...

He opened his mouth to allow them entry when an angry, high-pitched screech of an animal wailed through the crystalline halls, following immediately with the pained screams of what he assumed to be several of the Thorn Patrol guards waiting outside his study. The screams were accompanied by the sickly sound of tearing flesh and powerful impacts, the latter of which paired with the sound of snapping bones.

A sudden ****BOOM**** echoed out as something struck the floor with tremendous force, sending a soft shockwave through the rooms around it. The chalice would've toppled over and spilled its contents across the desk, were it not for Oberon's quick reflexes.

'What in the Hollow *is going* on *out there?!'* Oberon thought in bewilderment as he set his drink back down. "Send them in and be done with this nonsense!" He finally barked.

The Treant guards nodded before stepping back out of the doorway, using their elongated, primate-like branch-arms to push the doors fully open.

What came through could be compared with the opening act of a circus, were it not for the absurd amount of carnage that was a part of it: fifteen Thorns (green-skinned humanoid elf-like fairies with hair formed of long wooden spikes, ears tipped with them) came tumbling through the doorway

and collapsing into a massive groaning, twitching pile of broken limbs, shattered armor, and useless weapons.

Each one of them looked as if they each had gone a round with ten rabid wolverines; their bodies were covered in thin three-set lacerations from head to toe, leaving them soaked in their own sea-green blood, which began to pool collectively beneath them, while most of their limbs were bent and broken in directions that were entirely unnatural and very painful-looking. Their thorn-covered, amber-forged armor, legendary among the forest for being impenetrable by any foe, hung off their bodies in shattered fragments, the largest of said fragments possessing impressive cracks caused by powerful blows, their deadly spikes flattened and bent by said blows. Their leaf-blade swords, famous for being sharp and swift enough to slice through solid rock when wielded by properly trained hands, had all been crushed and broken beyond recognition, resembling crumbled balls of green paper.

It was such an unbelievable, *inconceivable* sight that it left King Oberon, the wise and unmovable King of the Fair Folk, stunned into silence; he opened his mouth several times to speak, but couldn't think of what to say, leaving him gaping like a fish out of water. The Thorn Patrol, the fiercest and deadliest warriors of the forest, and the pride of the kingdom's royal army. The story of how a single squad had saved the city from the attack of a *Stone Giant*, a living force of nature, had been one of his favorite stories as a feyling; stories of the legendary, unbreakable heroes of the kingdom...

...and here they were now, beaten within an inch of their lives, their tools of legends *utterly destroyed*.

What in the *Hollow* had happened here? What foe could've brought an entire squad of the Elite Thorns to their knees?!

Then something forced its way out from beneath the piles of groaning bodies, snarling as it did so, and the answer became perfectly clear...and for the second time that night, the mighty King Oberon was left shaken to his core.

Fresh out of the egg, the dragon was no larger than a house cat, which its body was only partially akin to: a long saurian body that resembled the

perfect mix between a cat and a lizard. It had six limbs in total: four legs and a pair of wings, the latter protruding from his shoulders. Its hind-legs were saurian in nature, complete with a digitigrade ankle structure and four-toed bird-like feet, while its forelegs were outright primate in build, complete with five-fingered hands with one being an opposable thumb; both his fingers and toes were tipped with sharp, curved claws, obviously used for slashing prey. Its dinosaur-like tail was incredibly long, twice the length as the rest of him, while his wings were large and bat-like, with four long fingers lined with a fiery-orange skin membrane and a single clawed thumb on each of the wing's 'hands'. His underbelly was lined with overlapping gold-colored scale-plating from chin to tail-blade, while the entire length of his spine was covered in hundreds of long dorsal spines that looked sharp enough to pierce through metal, the longest lining the back between his wing-shoulders and the thickened end of his tail, turning the latter into a deadly weapon. His neck was long and snake-like, yet thick and strong to support its head, which was more like a prehistoric beast dragon's than a traditional dragon's in appearance: outright saurian in structure, with a therapod-like snout and jaws, forward-facing eyes, bony eyebrow-ridges, a pair of backward-facing horns that curved upward in an S-shape from the back of his head, under which several smaller horns and chin spikes lined the back of his head and jaws. Its eyes glowed with a magical light in the dark, glowing pools of bright gold and magenta-purple with snake-like slit pupils, looking as if a literal fire was burning within them.

Any mortal being would've looked at it and believed it to be a normal dragon, especially those who would be more familiar with the tales spun in the medieval west; of great winged, fire-breathing monsters that burned down villages and stashed hoards of gold away in distant caves.

But to any member of the Fair Folk, two *very* important details set it apart from *any* other dragon alive.

One was what *kind* of dragon it was. The quadrupedal body structure, larger than average wings, exaggerated saurian features, long spiny dorsal plating, and fiery primal eyes...this was a baby *Safi'jiiva*; a prehistoric race of elder dragons from the Realm of Primordia, which were long thought to be extinct. To look upon this creature was akin to the fair folk as a human to

look upon a living dinosaur...but as incredible as that was in itself, it was the second feature that caused Oberon's mind to seize from sheer, disbelieving shock. A sight that he had, not once in his entire life, ever even dreamed of seeing for himself:

The color of the creature's scales: a brilliant royal purple, shimmering like hundreds of polished gemstones in the light of his study's hearth fire.

"Where..." He finally managed to gasp out, still staring wide-eyed as the fussy wyrmling squeezed itself out from between the tangle of Thorn bodies, standing on top of the pile and growling with disapproval of its situation. "...*where* did you find it?"

A harsh, wet cough came from the doorway; he tore his eyes away from the miracle before him and looked up to see the current captain of the squad standing in the doorway...well, somewhat standing, at least; the female Thorn leaned against the right of the door frame, her free arm wrapped around her torso, ribs evidently broken. The left side of her once pretty yet stern face had been torn open with what was now confirmed to be dragon scratches, sea-green blood splattered across her left shoulder and breast, her left eye having just missed being ripped out of its socket.

"A small cave near the edge of the Crystal Mountains." She managed to answer, before coughing up another mouthful of her own lifeblood. "It had literally just hatched, still wet from the egg, when we discovered it."

Oberon had hundreds of questions he wanted to ask, but one most important stuck out more than any other:

"Any sign of the parents?"

The captain spat in disgust. "There wasn't even a nest!" She snarled, cringing as her outburst agitated her ribs. "No nesting material, no bones from past kills, no footprints, *nothing*! The cave wasn't even big enough to house a Lindworm!" She paused to catch her breath, shifting herself into a less painful standing position. "The egg was sitting on the cave floor, with *no* means of keeping it warm whatsoever. Had it not hatched when it did..."

It was well known that eladrin were normally as stoic, calm, and stone-faced as the elves they resembled, showing little to no emotion unless under extreme conditions. And King Oberon was exceptionally so, his many years of ruling over the forest and the Fae having molded his ability to keep his cool to perfection.

So, it spoke leagues to the sheer amount of rage as his chiseled features twisted into a cold fury, his anger literally radiating off of him as his fairy-glow turned hot-red.

His anger did not go unnoticed; the baby elder dragon tensed at the sight of the enraged fairy before taking a battle stance, growling threateningly as it arched its spiny back in preparation to pounce, wings spreading and tail swishing back and forth.

The Thorns it was standing on, originally too pain-drunk to do much else than lie on the floor and moan in pain, quickly snapped back to alarmed awareness when they realized they were about to go for another round; screams filled the room as they all started to panic, scrambling to untangle themselves and put as much distance between themselves and the source of their agony as possible. The dragon perked up in surprise as the mound he was standing on began squirming violently under its feet, prompting it to hop off the pile before it lost its footing. Its claws clicked on the smoothed crystal floor as it turned around to watch all his former 'attackers' kicking and clawing, looking to all the world like a pile of stuck green pigs squealing in fear.

It was such a comedic, unflattering display that Oberon nearly lost his composure, his anger and red glow quickly fading as strong amusement tugged at the sides of his lips. The hatchling turned to look up at him, cocking its head to the side curiously, confused at the sudden shift in emotion it had sensed in this tall golden newcomer.

And despite her injuries, even the captain managed her own small grin. "We got him 'bout halfway back to the palace when he caught his first wind of life, at which point he started beating the honeydew outta us." She chuckled mirthfully. "Barely out of the egg and able to wipe out an entire squad." She

gave a chuckle of begrudging respect. "He's a fighting spirit, if nothing else."

"That will serve him well in the life that awaits him." Oberon said with a tone of admiration, before clearing his throat and steadying his mirth. There were far more important things to take care of right now; first, he turned his attention to the Treant guards, who had been standing back and watching the whole situation in silence, though a twinkle of amusement could be seen in their amber eyes. "Summon the Petals and have them take these Thorns to the infirmary." He commanded them. "Make sure each of these brave souls are given the best treatment we can provide; they deserve nothing less for their deeds tonight."

The Treant on the left nodded. ***"Stay away from the trees!"*** He boomed before turning to the hall outside; a glimmering glow of green and yellow magic began flowing through his branches, along with a light shower of sparkling pollen falling from his leaves. And soon enough, the musical giggles and fluttering of wings echoed through the halls as the Petals, small child-like pixies with dragonfly-like wings, dressed in tunics made of colorful flowers, answered the call; they fluttered and danced about, leaving a trail of sparkling dust behind them as they flew, which covered the bodies of the Thorns. The entire squad gave sighs of relief as the Petal's magic soothed the pain of their wounds, the dust coating the scratches and stopping the bleeding.

As the others prepared to move the squad to the royal infirmary for their promised healing, Oberon knelt down in front of the Safi'jiiva wyrmling, who had been watching the magical display with the wide-eyed wonder of a child; the hatchling snapped out of its trance when it noticed him move and turned to stare at him with suspicious eyes, giving a high-pitched growl of warning as it prepared to fight again.

"No need to fear, Son of Akatosh." The King of the Fairies assured him calmly, holding his hands up to show he was unarmed. "You're in the heart of *our* forest, and here you're among allies."

He then slowly lowered his hands and held the right one out in beckoning, as one would to a frightened animal.

After he had hatched, the young dragon's body and mind alike was still reeling from the trauma of being born; the shock of being torn from non-existence and thrown into the wide waking world of life was one that leaves all creatures reeling from it. However, he was a dragon, and thus a reptile; just like lizards and serpents, they hatched relatively independent and capable of surviving without parental rearing if circumstances forced it. After a few minutes of adjusting to his new existence, weaving in and out of a hazy mist, something in his brain finally snapped in place; the haze of confusion lifted, the sensations of the body became bearable, and from deep within his blood sprung forth a flood of ancient knowledge and instincts: feed on the flesh of prey to survive, take shelter from the dangers of the sky, seek out and gather the sparkling treasure of the earth, and fight tooth, claw, and flame against all who opposed his place as ruler of the land.

And the first thing he came to realize was that he was in the grasp of an unfamiliar creature, surrounded by more of them on all sides; tall, spike-covered beings with green skin and a scent like stripped tree branches. Unaware of their true intentions, the instinct to defend himself from potential threats took hold and he attacked; he shrieked, bit, scratched, struck, and kicked with primal fury, but despite their wounds, despite clearly being in pain, they would not release him and continued to carry him through the trees, while any attempts they made to force him still were met with stronger blows.

They did not stop until they brought him into the giant tree, finally collapsing from their injuries and allowing him to wriggle free from their grasp.

And now here he was: in their strange green, brown and gold cave with light inside, standing before a taller being with pointed ears, horns of treasure on his head, and his body shimmering with a golden glow.

The elder dragon pup stopped growling but remained on his guard as he eyed the hand with suspicion, unsure of what to make of all these shimmering creatures. Despite them taking him to this place, they didn't harm him doing so; even as he hurt them, they didn't once try to hurt him back, only to try to hold him still. And this tall golden one...this must've been their Alpha, and one great power, given how even the moving trees

that towered over him followed his voice with respectful loyalty; a creature could not command its physical greater unless there was a hidden strength it had to keep them in submission.

The Alpha of the Forest itself...and yet, despite being one who could command the very trees, he was making no attempt to harm him either. Just offering his hand, waiting for him to make the first move.

Ultimately, curiosity won over instinct, and with a hesitant croon the purple wyrmling took a step forward and sniffed the hand held out to him.

The Alpha of the Forest smelled like tree sap.

But the scent of the eladrin clicked with something deep within his blood, and another flood of instinctual knowledge rushed through his mind; images of a great glimmering tree from a far-away land. A magic tied deeply with the very world. Of his kind alongside the winged creatures of magic, neither side attacking nor fearing the other, but instead aiding each other in the eternal battle of survival.

A symbiotic alliance between two magical species.

Now he understood their intentions. Why they had brought him to this place without attacking him. Why the Alpha offered him his hand rather than raise it against him. These were *fairies*. The children of the Great Hollow. The ones who loved his kind and called him friend.

They were here to *help* him.

Any form of hostility remaining within him faded away as a deeply-welcomed sense of relief and comfort washed over him, now knowing he was finally safe from all the potential dangers lurking in the dark. His crooning became a pleased purr as he pushed his nose into the king's calloused but gentle hand, basking in the warm touch and the genetically-familiar smell of fairy magic (along with the sweet scent of tree sap).

Oberon smiled at the gesture, gently stroking the side of the dragon's snout with his fingers as it nuzzled his palm. When he felt the wyrmling was

comfortable enough, he reached down with both hands to pick him up under the forearms; the wyrmling shifted at the sudden movement, but ultimately allowed it to happen, being lifted up as Oberon stood back up, holding the small creature in front of him like one would lift a puppy. Though in this case, a scaly, winged, fire-breathing puppy with a long enough tail that the tip nearly touched the ground.

"For ten generations, we've awaited your birth." He said in hushed awe as he admired the infant in his hold, his emerald eyes meeting the creature's magenta ones. "For *twenty thousand* winters we've prayed for the day when you would once again grace us with your glory. For the chance for us to right the wrongs of our past, and see your kind restored to honor."

Too young to understand the words being spoken to him, to acknowledge the true weight they held, the dragon ignored them in favor of reaching up with his serpentine neck and gnawing at the rim of the king's crown, attracted to the gold. Oberon carried the purple wyrmling in his arms as he made his way through the study to the balcony, stepping out into the night.

And then the King of the Fair Folk lifted the wyrmling to the sky, as if presenting him to the world.

The sensation of being up in the air prompted the dragon to flap his wings in a lazy, awkward manner, the instinct there despite not yet knowing how to fly. Behind him, from Oberon 's point of view, the brilliant orange and green beams of moonlight from Zella and Adrano crossed paths into a single beam of bluish-purple light, which bathed the dragon like an almost heavenly aura.

The effect was not merely that of the light, though: the moment the combined moonlight touched his scales, the purple Safi'jiiva began to radiate with an ancient power drawn from deep within his body; mystical, bright-purple light glowed from under his armored skin, lighting him up with fiery stripes across his body and constellation-like markings across his wings, giving him an outright-divine appearance that shone brightly in the dark. An appearance only amplified as his eyes glowed with a brilliant white, like twin stars shining in the night.

This was the confirmation Oberon needed, the first tears he had shed in many, *many* years coming to his eyes as the baby dragon's high-pitched roar echoed through the night sky; the proof that this was indeed the beast of legend he and his people had waited so long to see.

The Aetherian Safi'jiiva...or the Purple Dragon, as he was known by the mortals. The Son of Akatosh. The Great Cleanser. The Lord of Time. The Heart of the Aether.

"And now, after all these years, the day has *finally* come...*Jendovahzoor*."

Chapter 4: A Hero's Return Home

Chapter Text

MANY YEARS LATER:

The ocean waves rose and fell as the early morning breeze blew across the surface of the northern sea, kicking up a cold spray with each gust.

The heavy ocean fog had yet to lift from the night before, filling the air and clouding the surface of the water with mist; the first beams of sunlight were starting to pierce through the haze, though, splitting through the clouds and shining down on the sea with a beautiful golden glow. Seagulls lazily circled the foggy air, searching for anything to snap up for breakfast, while dolphins breached and dove through the waves, chirping playfully back and forth as they swam.

The serenity of it all was broken by the distant sound of a ship's bell ringing three times, signaling the time of morning to all in hearing range.

As the bell rang across the sea, the large, unmistakable shadow of a royal frigate formed within the fog. Then, with the crashing waves against the sides of the hull, the blade-like bow of the mighty ship sliced through the water and fog like a knife through melted butter, the glorious sight of the vessel coming into view. The dolphins quickly dove out of the way as it came through, the strong southern winds pushing it along to its destination, undeterred by the waves.

The Veil Piercer, a fitting name for just a glorious vessel, was the pride and joy of Avalon's Royal Navy; built and carved from the strongest and healthiest of Feywild's Golden Oak Trees, it was as powerful as it was beautiful, and by far the largest ship in the entire fleet, well over two-hundred tons and almost a hundred-and-fifty feet from stern to bow.

True to the name of the trees, the wood used to build it was very light in color, almost akin to Birch Wood, but with a strong golden-yellow hue to it;

under the right light and distance, every part of the ship made of wood, from the slim hull to the three main masts, could appear to be made out of gold. Though due to the Fair Folk's aversion to iron, nothing of their ship was made of any kind of metal: all the parts that would've traditionally been made out of iron or steel (pulleys, plating, spar, rudder ,etc.) were instead either forged out of magically-hardened tree amber or carved flawlessly from a sparkling silver-colored crystal, giving the Veil Piercer an outright fantastical appearance of a ship made entirely out of treasure. The silver-crystal figurehead was that of a mighty pegasus in flight, mane whipping along the forward sail and wings spread behind it to hug the stern of the hull, its fore-hooves each a glowing crystal that served as the forward lanterns, piercing the fog with an ethereal light. The stern of the ship was a tall-set one, more akin to that of a Galleon's than a Frigate’s and was decorated with many beautiful statues of flying griffons, swimming mermaids, wise treants, and other magical creatures, with a grand stain-glass stern window of a mighty dragon breathing fire as the centerpiece.

It was a ship that, to the eye of mortal man, embodied the very essence of magic and fantasy, and all the stories that were born of it.

Which made it all the more fitting that it would be the one to carry the most famous of all mystical beasts across the sea; back to a home it had been away from for far too long.

Standing on the forecastle deck, leaning causally on the starboard railing, was another of the more famous mythical creatures; a lone female fairy, silently watching the ocean as the fog began to clear under the warmth of the morning sun.

Her appearance was very beautiful and similar to Oberon's in a lot of ways, though an eladrin she was not; with fair skin, chestnut-brown hair, and teal-blue eyes, she was far more human in appearance and size than the more elf-like king, standing at roughly the same height as the average human pre-teen. Her ears were long and elf-like as well, but it was her non-human features that made her stand out among her fellow fairies: her tailbone continued past her rear and into a medium-length tail resembling the sleek-yet-bloated abdomen of a wasp, yellow in color with a dark-lavender dorsal stripe running all the way down to the currently-retracted stinger at the tip.

Growing out from between her shoulders, a large pair of bright-purple butterfly-like wings rested together in a folded position, their sparkling veins carrying a glittering magic through them with each heartbeat. And on her head, poking out from under her hair, a pair of small dragon horns curved backwards and up in a slight S-shape.

She silently basked in the cool morning wind that blew across the ocean surface, clearing away the last bits of fog and bringing a welcomed cooling sensation to her face, neck, and collarbone. Her current attire consisted of a petal-dress with a light-orange corset that had a modest amount of cleavage, yellow elbow-length sleeves that parted into flower-like openings at the ends, and a knee-length skirt made of several layers of flower petals, orange on the outside and yellow underneath, the interior lined with a third petticoat layer of pink petals. The skirt flapped softly in the breeze, as did her hair, which was tied back into a high-set ponytail that was still long enough to reach her shoulders; only the long bangs on either side of her head hung free from the pink band that held the rest of it in place, curling at the tips to almost meet her chin.

A particularly soothing breeze blew from the sea, flowing across her face and through her hair; she closed her eyes and sighed with contentment, even allowing a genuine smile to grace her lips.

A rare sight for most to see on the face of Zoeandra Autumnleaf, Feywild's only native Dragon Fairy; a blessed Fae that held the deeply-envied honor and privilege of being kin and caretakers of the mightiest of all beasts...and it was for that very reason she was here.

Eternally accompanying her bestowed charge on his journey through life.

Which, right now, was a long overdue return to a homeland neither of them had seen for a *long* time.

Her pointed ears picked up uneven footsteps from behind, and her warm smile turned into a sneaky smirk as she cracked an eye open to see who was approaching her, barely turning her head. From the corner of said eye, she saw the captain approaching her; an old yet muscular rat dressed in an old captain's uniform and hat (the latter sporting a large green feather tucked in

it), both of which were as tattered and raggy as he was. The fur of his face was long and scraggy, forming a large bushy sailor's beard and equally-bushy eyebrows, the former of which having been stained a muddy-reddish color from his meals and choice of ale. His rodent teeth were yellow and chipped with age, the left tooth partially missing. His right leg had been lost, replaced by a rather bizarre peg-leg designed for a digitigrade species (the source of the odd footsteps) and supported by an old crutch he held under his right arm, while a notable notch in his tail gave it a crooked bend near the end.

All-in-all, he was the opposite of the Veil Piercer in just about every aspect. Still, a better captain in all of Nimh could not be found than Captain Redbeard (a nickname he had been given by his peers and crew alike), one of the few Rodentkin of Nimh to have ever seen the world beyond the Northern Sea.

Zoeandra didn't say a word as Redbeard hobbled over to the railing and wordlessly stood a few feet away from the fairy, leaning against it as a weary sigh escaped his chapped lips. She watched from the corner of her eye as he reached into his coat and pulled out a rather large bottle of his favorite rum and promptly took a few chugs from it; he drank so sloppily that some spilled from the bottle, the red liquid running down his face and into his beard. Hence the nickname.

Her mischievous smirk curled across her face as she glanced at him. "Little early to be hitting the bottle, wouldn't you say?" she asked in a snarky manner.

The old rat coughed a ragged breath before spitting a blob of what looked like tar over the side of the ship. "Ye and yer lizard be what drove me back ta the bottl' in the first place." He snapped with an irritated glare. "The sooner we pull 'ta port, the sooner I can be rid of ya livin' nightmares."

"Awwwww, you're saying that as if we *weren't* friends." The fairy cooed with a fake pout, leaning toward to him and fluttering her wings in a deliberately-teasing manner. "Admit it: you'll miss us once we're gone."

"Like a *mouth misses a toothache*." Redbeard grumbled, taking another swig of his bottle; Zoeandra's puppy-ese pout twisted into a Cheshire Cat's grin, revealing teeth that were far too sharp and cat-like to be those of normal fair-folk (another trait of her dragon-fairy nature). She then turned back to the ocean, neither of them saying a word for a good while, the only sound between them being the splashing of the waves against the hull and the cries of seagulls circling the ship.

Then Redbeard broke the silence. "So...ten years, eh?"

The grin fell from Zoeandra's face again, her expression and eyes alike becoming hard and wings drooping. "Yee-up." She popped humorlessly. "Give or take a year or two."

"Long time ta be away from home." He stated simply, overlooking the sea.

The fairy scoffed. "Made even longer when you fail your reason for leaving in the first place..." She snarled sarcastically, her abdomen tail swishing back and forth with agitation. "*Ten. Years.* Ten *bloody* years, and for *what*?" She gave a heavy, frustrated sigh. "*Nothing*...well, unless you count being *dragged into a war over a petty insult* something."

"Could be, giv'n how everyone was celebratin' o'er it," Redbeard offered as he took another drink. "Did the world a favor, yer beastie did; riddin' it of that green blowhard."

"Easy for *you* to say: *you're* not the one who has to report it all to Oberon himself." Zoeandra muttered bitterly, propping her right arm up to rest her head in her palm. "I can already hear the Council's reaction once they get the details. As if they don't have enough reasons to object to Spyro's choice of familiar..."

The rat cocked a bushy eyebrow at that. "*Spyro*? That's what they be callin' 'im nowadays?" He asked. When Zoeandra simply gave him a sideways smirk, he shrugged. "Eh, easier ta say than all that fancy jumbo you *bugs* come up with." He said with a grin.

"Glad you *vermin* finally have something you can pronounce." She quipped back with her own grin, not missing a beat. Redbeard merely gave a toast with his bottle, kicking it back to swig down the last mouthful.

"LAAAAND HOOOOOO!"

The fairy had been anticipating those two *wonderful* words for days now, so much so that she had often heard them echo in her head, altering her hopes only to dash them in self-disappointment. So, to suddenly hear the lookout in the crow's nest shout them for all the ship to hear…to actually hear them with her own ears instead of in her thoughts.

It was outright *euphoric*.

At long last, they were *finally home.*

"Ah, Neptune be praised!" Redbeard exclaimed as he promptly chucked the empty bottle over the railing of the ship, sending it to the eternal depths of Davy Jones' Locker. "'Nother day with ye lizard makin' a circus outta me crew and I would've walked the plank myself!"

He adjusted his crutch under his arm and turned about; said crew, made up of both Rodentkin and fair folk, were already scampering about the ship with gusto, adjusting the sails to pick up what speed they could, ready and eager to feel dry land beneath their feet. "Ye best wake 'im up so I can get ya both outta my hair as soon as we make port."

"Sooner than you might expect." Zoeandra stated with a cheeky smile, wings unfurling from their folded shape; a brilliant magenta glimmer flowed from the base of her wings out to the tips, a glimmering dust of the same color blowing about as she took to the air, her wings fluttering like those of a butterfly. She turned to follow the captain's instructions for one last time, but before she took off, she gave Redbeard once last glance over her shoulder; her smile remained cheeky but developed a sincere glow. "Been a pleasure sailing with you and your crew, Redbeard."

The old rat gave a huff of disagreement, yet a warm twinkle in his faded eyes remained. "As much-a pleasure as scabies, Zoeandra," he told her.

"Best of luck to ya two."

"Thanks..." The fairy said, her wings shining in the morning sun, "...and call me Zoe."

The old rat merely waved her off as he hobbled away, heading to take his place at the helm. Zoe watched him go for a moment before she flipped backwards in the air and zoomed off, flying across the deck with impressive agility, weaving back and forth through the masts, rigging, and crew before slowing to a landing stop in front of the doors that led to the lower floor of the stern castle.

Unlike most other ships, the captain's quarters were located at the upper floor of the stern castle, making it double-function with the navigation room, while the lower floor were completely refitted and repurposed to serve as the chambers of this voyage's passenger of interest. The deck stairs leading up to the helm were built to line up with the very sides of the ship, to allow for as much room to the lower chambers as possible. The doors of the lower chambers had also been designed with such an idea in mind: a massive set of double doors as wide as the walls and stairs would allow, made to be able to open the entrance to the interior as widely as possible.

A wise design choice, considering for what kind of passenger this ship was originally made to carry across the ocean.

Not even bothering to so much as to knock, Zoe opened the doors and stepped into the darkened room. A soft clinking crunch beneath her shoes brought her attention to the dozens of gold coins and a small number of gemstones scattered across the floor. Looking up, she saw that nearly the entire floor of the room was covered in treasure, with a massive pile in the middle that reached as high as half-way up the walls in some places.

One could mistake it for a pirate's plunder, but in reality, it was perhaps the most expensive bed in all of Nimh. A bed that only one kind of creature would find comfortable.

In the center of the room, half-buried within a bed of gleaming gold and sparkling gemstones, she spotted him. His powerful chest rose and fell with

every breath, each breath crackling out between his teeth with a low flame, as he lay curled upon his hoard. His long tail wrapped around the pile of gold, protectively guarding it as he slept, while his limbs remained tucked at his armored sides, talons lightly scrapping against the coins and gemstones. His fiery-orange wings shifted in his sleep, creating small gusts of wind strong enough to scatter a few of the loose coins, while his horns and spines scraped against the pile as he ground his head into the gold, eyes closed in dreamless slumber.

The muffled sound of waves mixed with the creaking of wood as the hull of the ship bobbed with the movement of the sea provided a slow, soothing motion that helped the beast sleep. This was how he preferred to spend most of the voyage, as it was the best way to pass the long weary days of sea-travel, whenever he grew bored of terrorizing the crew.

She shook her head in amusement at the thought; fun times, indeed...but thankfully, those times were over.

"Rise and shine, sleepy-heeead!" she called in a sing-song manner, making absolutely no effort to be gentle about it.

A deep growl of frustration escaped Spyro's jaws as his fairy's, currently-obnoxious, voice flooded his ears. Her every word was like the blows of a gnorc's mace to his skull, pounding his still-half-asleep brain into mush. With the shimmering shift of gold coins, he lifted himself up on his front legs just enough to turn his spine-covered back to his intruder before promptly flopping back down with a heavy thud. The ship rocked from the impact, the deck creaking dangerously beneath them.

There was a panicked scream from outside, stretching long and loud until it was promptly cut by a loud splash, quickly followed by angry shouts from the rest of the crew.

"You knocked Riley outta the crow's nest again." Zoe stated flatly, not even bothering to turn around and look.

Spyro snorted, twin streams of smoke shooting out of his nostrils. ***"I'm not waiting 'til New Year's Eve for him to take another bath."*** he grumbled,

his voice drumming with a growling reverb and crackling with the sound of open flames.

The fairy rolled her eyes as she entered the 'Dragon's Den', which the lower cabin had been renamed, gingerly making her way across the loose treasure. The young Safi'jiiva growled a half-hearted warning as she approached, but otherwise made no effort to stop her from sitting down next to his head and fondly scratching the side of his left eye-ridge. He gave another groan as he pushed his head up against her right thigh, rolling it over just enough to squint open a bleary gold-and-magenta eye at her amused expression.

"You planning on sleeping the day away?" She asked.

He huffed in annoyance, closing his eyes and rolling his head back to rest, ***"I might, if there's no reason to get up."***

To that, Zoe grinned in anticipation as she shifted around to face Spyro directly. "How about 'Land Ho'?"

She could feel his body suddenly tense as her words caught him off guard, his crackling breath catching for a split second, before turning his head around to look directly at her with wide, alert eyes.

"...*What*?" he asked in a near-silent whisper.

"The barrelman *just* announced it a few seconds ago," she told him eagerly, outright bouncing with excitement, wings fluttering rapidly. She paused for a second. "Well, before you knocked him overboard..." her hands cupped the stunned dragon's chin, bringing his massive head up to meet her gaze. "We're *back*, Spyro...we're *finally* back *home*! *Nimh*!"

For a moment, Spyro seemed frozen on the spot, staring at her as if he was unable to grasp what she was telling him...then, as if struck by lightning he practically sprung to motion, outright leaping to his feet with a flurry of wind and gold; the treasure pile that he was buried in outright erupted with him in a burst of gold coins and gemstones, spraying forth in a great explosion of treasure that scattered across the room, clattering against the wooden walls and floor. His body and tail whipped around as he outright

clawed his way out of his makeshift hoard, his horns and spines scraping long grooves in the ceiling, and his tail whipping around so fast it nearly smashed into the stain-glass window.

Eventually he caught his footing and, like a massive sea-serpent rising from the depths, he pulled himself out through the doorway of the Dragon's Den in a serpentine slither before standing up on all fours and lifting his head to full height, eyes wide and searching for the long-awaited promise land of home.

The small, cat-sized wyrmling the Nocturnal Patrol had found wriggling helplessly in that small, cold cave was long gone, now standing tall and strong as a healthy juvenile Safi'jiiva, just shy of becoming a 'teenager' by elder dragon standards yet already as almost as large as Dragon, the great Monster Cat of Nimh, towering well over most species of fair folk and all species of rodentkin. His appearance had also changed over the many years as well, having long outgrown most of his 'hatchling' features. He was no longer a stumpy little wyrmling by any means, though enough of his youthful attributes remained to show that he wasn't done growing. But even then, he was still a truly intimidating sight, every part of him, down to each single scale, shaped to be as primal, fearsome, and draconian in appearance as possible.

Truly a Safi'jiiva in his prime: an Elder Dragon born and forged for the eternal primal war that was the Realm of Primordia.

But right now, in this long-awaited moment, he was but a homesick child that had finally come home.

The other rats barely had time to pull Riley back on board before the ship was rocked again as Spyro bounded across the deck like a giant cat, sending the lot of them sliding across the deck or even screaming back into the briny blue with more splashes. The dragon ignored the commotion he was causing, though, only paying enough attention to avoid stepping on anybody; his focus was locked on getting to the bow of the ship, serpentining through the masts, leaping over the capstan, and ducking under the rigging until he made it to the front, propping his front paws on the base of the figurehead to look out as much as possible.

By now, the last bits of morning fog were fading away under the heat of the rising sun, revealing what the barrelman had called for all to see: the distant shores of Feywild, with beaches as white as snow, a massive field of tall grass and flowers waving in the wind behind the shore, leading up to the massive trees of the great forest filling up the horizon view like a second ocean of leaves. The glow of the morning sun broke through the clouds above, casting the shore and forest in an outright mystical light, as if to welcome the lost, weary soul of this dragon back home.

Nimh. The Isle of the Alchemists. The Land of the Rodentkin.

Home.

Spyro stood atop the bow of the Veil Piercer unmoving, staring at the land of his birth with unwavering eyes. Ten years... he had dreamt of this moment for *ten years*, ever since he had been taken from his happy life of old and watched it disappear over the horizon behind them. Every day he spent in the so-called "Dragon Realms", forced to go along with the Council's wishful thinking, only to be dragged into a war with the green-skins that kept him away for far longer than anyone had intended. And for *far*, ***far*** longer than he wished to stay, up until he finally, *personally*, sent their idiot leader straight to the depths of the underworld. He had been overjoyed when they announced they would be returning soon, and the subsequent journey home had been torturous; every day was a day closer, but it felt like an eternity of longing.

He had waited for this moment for so long that, now that it was here, it almost didn't seem real. Like it was a trick of the longing heart, wanting to see something that wasn't truly there.

Then a flickering shadow passed over him, and he looked up to a sight that purged all doubt from his mind and brought a blooming fire of joy to his heart: a giant Swallowtail Butterfly, with a body as large as a German Shepard and wings as large as the ship's sails, fluttered down from the heavens.

Spyro watched in almost-hypnotized awe as the massive insect landed on the rope strung between the bowsprit and the foremast, above his head. The

massive wings opened and closed with the creature's heartbeat, casting a rainbow of colors upon the deck and dragon alike when open. Still as if in a trance, the drake shifted his weight back on his hind legs and 'stood back' on them, much like how a bear rears up on its hind legs, stretching his neck upwards towards the visitor and sniffing it curiously. The smell of Nimh's giant flowers filled his nostrils, his nervous system firing wildly as long dormant memories from a life left behind awakened to full clarity; memories of a world much larger than the one he had been trapped in for so long. The butterfly, as if in greeting, uncoiled and extended its proboscis down to him in turn, licking up the droplets of the sea-spray that had gathered on the dragon's facial scales.

A gurgling croon bubbled from Spyro's throat at the touch as an indescribable wave of joy filled his flaming heart, his eyes glowing with a bright starlight of emotion.

He was back: after ten *painfully*-long years of violent war, wishful dreaming, and great suffering, followed by two months of an outright agonizing wait...*he was finally home.*

Once satisfied, the giant butterfly retracted its tongue and took to the skies once more, wings fluttering as it retreated back to the distant shore. If Spyro's wings had been developed enough, he would've flown after it; to just jump off this confining ship and soar as fast and as far as he could until the ocean was no longer in sight...

...you know what? He couldn't fly, but that wasn't a bad idea at all. He was sick of this boat, sick of the ocean, and sick of waiting any longer.

Zoe, who had been letting Spyro enjoy the moment from a respectable distance, nearly choked on her own tongue when the Purple Safi'jiiva suddenly hopped up onto the figurehead and, with an outright explosive kick of his hind legs, promptly leapt off the Veil Piercer in an arching jump, diving headfirst into the water with a thunderous splash and disappearing beneath the waves.

The sheer recoil shock of the jump split the keel of the ship straight across the curve, and with a splintering tear of wood the entire front of the bow,

figurehead and all, fell forward into the water with its own massive splash. With the keel broken, the entire ship began to split under its own weight, snapping clean in half with a thunderous tear of wood, amber, and crystal. The masts fell like great trees, crashing into each other and tearing the sails from their rigging, ropes snapping, and pulleys being flung like flails. All the while, the crew was scrambling about like a flurry of panicking chickens, screaming curses as the ship slowly began to sink into the shallows; those of fair folk were clawing for the lifeboats, trying (and failing) to avoid any contact with the salt-filled waters, while all the rodentkin did little more than fall overboard, surrendering themselves to the fact they were swimming to shore.

The dragon fairy watched the entire thing unfold beneath her with a stunned silence, having flown out of range when she heard the keel snap. She just hovered there, watching the mighty Veil Piercer, the pride and joy of Avalon's Royal Navy and King Oberon's personal ship (which he had poured a king's ransom worth into building), sinking into the shallows of Nimh's northern shores. It was almost as if the ship itself, after enduring so much after a four-month round trip at sea with a restless purple dragon, had finally been freed of the burden of dealing with Spyro's antics and was finally just *collapsing* with relief, sinking into the depths for a long, well-deserved rest.

She gave a long, tired groan, running a hand down her face in exasperation. She could already hear the verbal chewing out she was going to get when she returned to the palace.

But, as she spotted the dark, serpentine shape of her dragon beneath the distant waters, already well on his way to shore, she decided that it could be someone else's problem to report.

She and her dragon were home, and as far as she was concerned, that's all that mattered.

So, without so much as giving the sinking Pride of Avalon's Navy another glance, she simply left, leaving a trail of magenta pixie dust behind her as she flew to catch up with her dragon. As she did so, Redbeard, thoroughly drenched and clinging to a piece of driftwood, grumbled many a half-

hearted curse upon the dragon and his fairy under his breath as he and the other rats began paddling to shore themselves.

"A pox upon both of ye!" he shouted after them. "...and best'a luck ta ya both, ye scrappy sea devils."

Chapter 5: Of Meetings and Reports

Chapter Text

It was wonderful to *finally* feel solid earth again.

Reaching the part of the shallows where the ocean was shallow enough for his paws to touch the seafloor, Spyro shifted from swimming like a crocodile to walking along the bottom, wading through the water until he finally stepped out onto the beach, the last few inches of the waves lapping at the back of his paws as he completely exited the water. The pleasant sensation of warm sand grinding between his toes, the solidity of the unmovable earth beneath his feet, and the cool early-spring breeze blowing from the west all brought a sense of satisfaction to the Safi'jiiva's chest, prompting a deep reptilian purr to come from his throat.

And once he stepped far enough away from the water, he promptly shook himself dry like a dog while flapping his wings, sending a light spray of sea-water in all directions.

"*ACK*!"

The pained exclamation alerted him to his fairy's presence, and he turned his head to see Zoe hovering only a few feet away from him, recoiling from the drizzle he unwittingly sprayed her with; her skin gave a hiss of steam where the salt water touched, forming light red spots of irritation across her arms, shins, and face, akin in appearance to the irritated burns caused by poison ivy. This was a natural reaction fairies had to anything with salt in it, given their kind had a strong natural aversion to the mineral in question.

"A little warning would've been nice!" She snapped as she dried herself off with the sleeves and skirts of her dress.

Spyro merely snorted animalistically at the sight, more bemused than concerned, absentmindedly whipping his tail back to shake the last of the water off.

Zoe gave a pouty 'hmph!' in response, but otherwise said nothing more regarding the matter as she continued drying herself; the red spots faded from the Dragon Fairy's skin as her magic healed the burns, making them disappear as quickly as they arrived; that was a reason most of the Veil Piercer's crew had been made up of rodentkin, despite it being a fairy ship. And the fact she and the other members of the crew that had been Fae risked going out to sea in the first place truly spoke to how strongly they viewed the importance of the entire journey...and how much trouble they were in when said ship was (unintentionally) sunk in the shallows, leaving the fairies to either fight with the rats for a spot in the lifeboats, or end up taking a dip in what was akin to acid to them.

The fact that the original mission they embarked on was a failure only added insult to injury.

The sound of shifting sand turned both of their gazes to a distant spot on the beach. Several yards away, a large mound rose up as a large creature emerged from below the surface of the nearby dune, the sand sliding off its back like waterfalls of tiny stone: a massive hermit crab, as large as a full-grown bull, pulled itself and its chariot-sized shell out of its hiding place, having been disturbed by the sound of other creatures. Enormous legs as thick as the arms of a gorilla clawed at the sand with lazy determination, their owner set to move but more than confident in its protective shell as to not be in a hurry to escape the potential danger.

Its pitch-black eyes twitched on their stalks toward the dragon and fairy, eyeing them quietly for a moment, before the massive crustacean turned away and began dragging itself towards the ocean, leaving a deep trail behind it.

Spyro turned his head to follow the giant crab, the sight of it only helping to confirm that he was indeed back on Nimh. It made him recall when they had first arrived in the Dragon Realms, and he had seen their version of hermit crabs on the beach near the harbor; he had been deeply disappointed by their laughably tiny size, no bigger than a pebble. He had no idea why any dragon that lived there would even bother trying to catch them; the delicacy of their meat was not worth the energy it would take to catch enough to fill their stomachs. As he later would learn, they didn't eat the

crabs. But the firsts of a long, *long* list of disappointments that the next decade of his life would end up being for him.

The so-called 'glorious' Dragon Realms, and the fairies of Feywild had described it: The 'homeland' of his kind.

Laughable.

Eventually the crab crawled far enough away and began to descend into the shallows, submerging itself out of the reach of the potential predator that had awakened it. Spyro watched it go for just a little longer before he turned his sights back to what awaited him just beyond the sand: the wide expanse of a grassy meadow, half-way between the transition from winter to spring. He could tell by the mixture of brown and green in the grass that the snow had just melted away, allowing the sun to finally start bringing the world back to life. The slight chill lingering in the air was further proof of this; a sign that the frost of winter had only just left the ground.

But as beautiful as it was, it was another sight of the meadow that drew his attention. One that, just like the crab, cemented the fact that he was finally home:

Scattered across the field, like trees scattered across the savannas, were massive flowers that were as large as small trees, some tall enough to reach his underbelly, with stems as thick as saplings and petals extending several feet in diameter. On one of these flowers, he spotted the giant butterfly from before, drinking deeply from the rich pools of nectar within its stamen.

Beyond the field he could see the distant north-western edge of Feywild Forest, the forest that he had lived in for most of his life; the trees were absolutely gigantic, standing as large and tall as skyscrapers, stretching hundreds of feet into the sky and with canopies wide and thick enough to completely eclipse the sun.

He was finally back.

Nimh, the Land of the Rodentkin.

The Rodentkin were the rodent version of Beastkin: the animal-people that could speak words and walk on their hind legs like humans could. There were several different kind of rodentkin; the most common were the Rats, who were about the same size as Zoe on average, but others included the smaller Mice and Shrews, along with Hedgehogs, Moles, Squirrels, and other such 'woodland critters' (minus the rabbits and the bats, as they were of a different race class than the rodents, as he had been taught with notable exception: the rabbits were known as the El-ahrian, while the bats were known as the Nocturnal).

It was believed that the rodentkin were the reason Nimh was such a different place to the rest of the world outside it: it was as if, in response to their size, everything here had been magically scaled up to match them; from the flowers and trees to the insects and animals, all now much larger than they were in other lands.

To outsiders, it would seem as if they themselves had shrunk down to the size of a mouse; a no-doubt frightening experience for those unprepared for it.

But to Spyro, who had been born in this land, feeling as small as a mouse was to feel right at home.

It had been the size of everything on the so-called mainland that had unnerved him: everything was so tiny and weak by comparison, as if he had been forcibly enlarged into a giant, making it a very hard and cumbersome process for him to adjust to the illusion of size-change for the first year or so. Not to mention said size-change brought with it a forced change of diet that he did not appreciate; while the flesh of the mammals of the mainland had been delicious (he had gained a particularly strong taste for sheep), he had found himself longing for the pleasant crunchiness and sweet juice of Nimh's giant insects.

...All that being said, while everything was indeed back to a satisfying size, he couldn't help but still feel that it still wasn't as big as he remembered it to be. He didn't recall being able to see the top of the tall flowers back in the day. so why-?

Realization hit him rather suddenly, and he looked down at his hand, pulling it back to reveal the footprint in the sand underneath; a footprint that was as nearly as large as Zoe was now, while he could remember a time he was once the same size as she was. He remembered the two of them being at near eye-level with each other when they first boarded the Veil Piercer all those years ago...

How much *had* he grown since he last saw the fields of giant flowers? How long had it *truly* been since he had roamed the forests of sky-reaching trees?

Too long.

Far, *far* ***too long***.

"I'd almost forgotten just how *big* everything was." Zoe said quietly as she hovered next to his head, observing the sight of the meadow with an unreadable expression on her face. She almost looked lost, her memories of home just as ancient and alien to her and his was to him.

"Still feels too small." Spyro growled, using his claws to scratch the footprint out of the sand in disgust.

The fairy allowed a light-hearted smirk at his comment. "Don't go blaming the world for being unable to keep up with your stomach." She stated cheekily as she poked the side of his head with a finger. Spyro gave an irritated snarl and snapped his jaws at the offending finger, which Zoe yanked away from the blade-sized teeth just in time to avoid losing it. Her smirk became a more sincere smile. "Growing this big is natural for your kind; it would've been the same had you stayed."

The dragon gave a deep, gurgling sigh that sounded like an alligator's growl as he turned back to stare out over the fields of green. A moment of silence passed between them, before Zoe spoke again, her smile turning into a displeased frown.

"I imagine they're already missing us back in Avalon." She told him flatly, sounding no more pleased than he was at the idea. "With plenty to complain about, I'm sure. Should we start our way ba-"

"No."

The single word outright thundered across the beach with a crackling growl akin to the roar of open flame, interrupting her mid-speech with the unwavering suddenness of a lightning strike; Spyro's voice outright transformed into the voice of a true Elder Dragon: deep, thunderous, and fiery, like a force of nature given tongue. His anger was emphasized by his eyes, which were now literally burning with golden-orange fire, the flames licking the sharp spikes of his eye ridges. He glared toward the edge of Feywild Forest, which sat to the northwest of their current location.

"I'm* done *playing their pointless games." He growled in his 'dragon voice', sending heavy vibrations through Zoe's very bones, as well as scaring the roosting seagulls into the air, screeching up a storm while desperately flapping their wings to escape the great reptile as fast as possible. He gave a defiant huff as he turned away from the forest, opting to start heading towards the south-western fields instead. ***"If they seek for further audience with me, they will do so on* my *terms."***

Zoe cocked an eyebrow at this statement, though she couldn't stop the feeling of sisterly pride from blooming in her breast.

"Defying the wishes of the kingdom, eh?" she asked, tilting her head to the side with a lopsided grin. She tapped her chin with a finger, as if in thought. "Now *where* in the world could you've gotten *that* from, I wonder?" The dragon snorted in annoyance to her question, though his upper lip curled up in a saurian's version of his own grin, the flames of his eyes cooling back down to a soft glow. She shrugged, pulling her arms behind her head, and leaning back to pop the kinks out of her arms and spine. "So, if not Feywild, where shall we head off to first, then?"

Spyro paused to give it thought, a deep rumble of thought thrumming from his throat as he stared at the ground for a moment...before his eyes lit up as the answer crossed his mind:

"I've missed my favorite sunning spot for a decade." He stated simply, swinging his tail in a swishing flick. "It's about time I returned to it."

Not even a few hours since the dragon had returned, and King Oberon was already being reminded of what it meant to be the overseer of the Jendovahzoor.

He had almost forgotten how *aneurysm-including* it could be.

When the watchmen of the kingdom's western outpost announced the sight of the Veil Piercer on the distant horizon, it had sent the entire kingdom into a flurry of talk and excitement. Even in the lifespan of the fae, ten years was a long time to go without seeing someone, let alone their ward of the purple dragon of legends. Just about every fairy in the forest had gathered at Avalon's Riverside Docks to see the mighty ship sail up the river, golden sails glimmering in the sunlight, all leading up to that one glorious, anticipated moment when the great Jendovahzoor would finally step foot on Nimh soil for the first time in a decade. Given the Veil Piercer's famous speed, they would see the ship arrive within the hour, just in time to be greeted with a celebration feast for breakfast. There were booths selling sweet treats, party games with prizes for the children, musicians piping enchanted music so wonderful that it made one dance involuntarily, and everything else that once would expect for what many would see as the greatest event of the entire decade.

It wouldn't be until several hours later when three lifeboats cramped with the soggy crew slowly paddled their way to dock, the mere sight of it all being enough to put a halt to the music and celebration in an instant.

And that's how Oberon found himself here: seated on his throne in meeting with the Grand Calendula Council to address the matter of the Veil Piercer's impromptu destruction, and the absence of their legendary beast of prophecy, instead of celebrating his long-awaited return.

The former crew of the Veil Piercer, or at least the Fair Folk members of it, were still dripping with sea-water as they stood before the council, said water pooling on the smooth amber floor beneath them, while their bodies were red with the burns of the ocean's salt, appearing sunburned from head to toe (which was impressive for the plant-based crew members, as they were normally not capable of sun-burning).

Massaging his temples did little to relieve him of the intense headache he was currently experiencing, and the shouting between the other members of the council wasn't helping it either. The Veil Piercer...the pride and joy of his entire personal fleet...a ship that had cost more time and gold to construct than it had to build than your average medium-sized village...built for the chosen purpose of ferrying the Jendovahzoor to the land of his fellow dragons as swiftly yet comfortably as possible...split in half and sunk to the bottom of the northern shallows by said Safi'jiiva, taking with it a king's ransom's worth of materials and treasure with it. Only the top of the last intact mast stood unclaimed by the depths and visible from shore, pathetically poking out from just above the ocean's surface like the reaching hand of a drowning sailor, the flag of Feywild hanging limp and heavy with sea-water.

It was going to take *months* to salvage the recoverable pieces from the ocean bed, such as the rigging, treasure, and supplies (made no less difficult by it being under salt water). And even if they could somehow pull the ship itself from its watery grave, there was no saving it; the keel had been split in half by the dragon's raw strength, and without its literal spine, the Veil Piercer was never to sail again. They would have to rebuild a new ship straight from the ground up. And that, frankly, was only if they were ever going to send Spyro away from the mainland again and, judging by the dragon's eagerness to get to shore, that was probably never going to happen.

He sighed heavily, that particular thought weighing heavily on his mind; *so* much time, money, and resources...*wasted.*

"And he was heading *away* from Feywild, last you saw of him?" The Eladrin asked, making sure to hide his emotions behind a voice of commanding calm.

The former first mate, a soaked and grumpy Spriggan whose trademark fiery-red hair and beard hung wet and dripping over his face, nodded with a huff. "Didn't so much as spare us'a glance, not even once." He spoke in a gruff voice, pausing to shake the water from his beard, spluttering as he did so. "Last we saw a 'im, he was headin' south-west, t'words the woodl'nds linin' the moun'ins."

"That puts him straight on the path to the southern border!" The Grig Representative exclaimed, stomping the ground in front of his chair with his grasshopper-like foot.

"The Rodentkin will discover him for sure!" The Shimmerling Representative shouted in turn.

The Spriggan Representative slammed his mud-colored fist on the council chamber's grand table, the harden amber ringing under the blow. "We must take action before that happens!"

"All of you, calm yourselves!" Oberon barked, his voice louder than all the others; the council quieted down, staring at their king with expectant expression. Taking a moment to collect himself, the King of the Fair Folk first turned to the crew and dismissed them with a wave of his hand. "You've all done your kingdom and dragon well. Treatment for your salt-burns awaits you all at the infirmary." The first mate nodded in gratitude before he and the others left the council chambers, leaving a trail of water on the floor behind them. Only once the great oak doors closed with a loud clap did Oberon allow himself to sink back into his chair with a heavy sigh, resting his head against the knuckles of his left hand.

"Well, *that* was a waste of an entire decade..." He muttered bitterly, no longer obligated to hide his frustration.

"Perhaps we gambled a little too heavily on the idea of the Tamrizerothian races accepting any kind of Elder Dragon pup, let alone a Safi'jiiva." The Seasonal Fairy Representative said in agreement. "We would not welcome the equivalent of a primal monster into our homes. Why would they?"

"His heritage could also be a factor of their rejection." The Nixie Representative spoke, taking a moment to brush her long, wet hair out of her sliver-green face. "Sacred Beast of Legend or not, the scars of his predecessor still haven't had enough time to fully heal. Even most of us feared to accept the reality of another Jendovah being born we he was first brought to us."

"None of that matters now!" Spriggan snapped angrily. "Regardless of how or why, Jendovahzoor has been rejected by the Realm Dragons and is back in Nimh, now of size and strength for the entire continent to see!"

"We all knew that Nimh would learn of his presence sooner or later. It's only a matter of time, regardless of the outcome of the expedition." Oberon stated in a much calmer tone than before, though he remained slouched in his seat, quite lacking the will to bother looking presentable. "Feywild Forest cannot hold Jendovahzoor forever; with every passing day the dragon grows, and as he does, so does the urge to leave the nest."

"Agreed: he's no longer the pup he once was." Nixie said. "The forest alone is no longer a suitable home for him; dragons need the open sky to spread their wings, not a cage of trees."

"And once Jendovahzoor *does* learn how to fly, his territory boundaries will skyrocket." The Banshrae Representative added sullenly, his telepathic voice as gloomy as his demeanor. "It's only a matter of time before all of Nimh becomes his domain to explore."

"Which is why we need to act now, before it's too late!" Shimmerling interrupted, her crystalline wings shivering with emotion. "We've kept Jendovahzoor's existence a secret from the Rodentkin because their cowardice is as strong as their feral brethren; the moment they learn that a *dragon* is on Nimh, let alone an *Aetherian Safi'jiiva*, the outcries of fear will be as loud as a stone giant's roar!"

"And with said fear comes violent retaliation." The Redcap Representative said, adjusting his signature cap atop his head as he spoke. "It'll only be a matter of time before a bounty will be placed on his head, and every would-be *dragonslayer* seeking to make a name for themselves will be after him."

Another round of whispering and muttering passed around the council, this time in a much angrier and hate-filled tone.

Dragonslayer.

A word that the Fair Folk truly despised with every fiber of their being.

Blasphemy given Title.

"Not the mention that with revelation of his existence, they'll also learn that *we* had been willingly keeping him here, within reach of their lands, for all this time." Grig said with concern, scratching the exoskeleton plating on his head. "What little peace that exists between the Fair Folk and the Rodentkin will be completely shattered when that happens."

"Then what do you suggest we do? Imprison our own savior within the confines of the forest?" Banshrae asked incredulously. "Lock him away like a wild beast within a cage? Never let him see the sunlight again?" He would've spat in disgust if he had a mouth to do so with. "Blasphemous nonsense, as well as impossible!"

"Agreed. He's now far too strong for any of us to force him against his will." Nixie said in agreement. "It is inevitable: as King Avalon said, Jendovahzoor and our involvement with him will soon be known throughout all of Nimh, whether we like it or not."

"Scattered, inexperienced hunters are of little concern." Oberon spoke up himself, putting his own two cents in the conversation. "If Jendovahzoor can crush an entire night patrol squad as an infant, then a few rats looking for easy coin will be child's play by comparison for a pre-teen dragon. One with far more training in his elements and far more experience in combat than most dragons his age have..." His brow furrowed in troubled thought. "No...it's the idea of him encountering the other Titan Beasts of Nimh that concerns me the most."

That got the council's attention, this time the in-talking whispers being fearful and dreaded. After all, Jendovahzoor was only one of several great beasts that roamed the lands of Nimh, and he was but the youngest and smallest of all of them.

One was the great Monster Cat of Nimh, Dragon (a creature of ironic name, honestly) a huge, bloodthirsty beast that terrorized all of Nimh as it pleased, feasting on entire villages to satiate its never-ending appetite. It feared neither sword nor magic in the name of satisfying its hunger, and while Spyro may have been of similar size now, the giant cat currently had him

beat in sheer muscle and savage ferocity, more than capable of ripping a pre-teen dragon to shreds.

Then there was the Great Owl, a truly ancient and feared monster of the sky; a giant, ancient owl that had hunted Nimh's inhabitants for as long as any of them remembered. It was so powerful and long-lived that the Rats worshipped it as a godly beast, wise and knowledgeable to where even Oberon himself had once sought an audience with it in times of need. The encounter with the great bird of legend, massive in size and mighty in strength despite its incredible age, was one he would remember clearly for the rest of the days. The Owl was intelligent and cool-tempered enough to be reasoned with, but if he and Jendovahzoor ever crossed paths, it would no doubt result in a vicious fight for territory.

And while Jendovahzoor may have been the legendary Aetherian Safi'jiiva, but he was young, soft, and comparatively-inexperienced; at his current age and strength, even with the ability to wield the elements on his side, he wouldn't stand a chance against either of them.

Then there was...the *third* one.

Oberon sighed wearily once more, his frustration with the dragon's antics giving way to genuine concern, the smallest glimmer of worry and exhaustion escaping from his normally unbreakable expression. He squeezed his eyes shut with self-anger.

If only their venture to the Realms had not been in vain...

"Well...what *do* we do then?" The question was spoken so softly and hesitantly, no one could tell who had spoken it.

The king gave himself a moment to compose himself, opening his eyes and looking out over all the expecting faces staring at him. His kingdom, and its future, all looking to him for the answer to a question that could potentially spell their doom. The crown on his head suddenly felt ten times heavier, threatening to break his back from the sheer weight of the entire forest riding on its decisions.

It was times like this he *truly* missed the support of his old friend.

"For now, I will contact Jendovahzoor's Dragon Fairy and get a fully-detailed report of what happened in the Realms and the Gnorc War." He finally decided, straightening himself up. "Perhaps she can shed light of what went wrong."

The sound of rushing water reached Spyro's ears, and he paused mid-step to turn his head in a saurian manner, looking in the direction it was coming from: to the right of his current path, beyond the wall of grass and flowers that surrounded him on all sides. His forked serpentine tongue licked at the roof of his mouth, a sudden thirst making itself known in it and his throat as he crooned with a dry breath; apart from licking the large morning dewdrops off the giant flowers of the meadow he was traveling through, he hadn't had a proper drink of water since the night before...

Zoe fluttered to a halt when she noticed the dragon suddenly stop and turn to stare to their right; she was about to ask what was wrong when her own elf-like ears picked up the sounds of flowing water.

Without a word, Spyro promptly turned in the direction of the sound, pushing his way through the wall of stalks in front of him, leaving a tramped tunnel behind; his fairy waited until the entirety of his spiny tail slid through the air after him before she followed herself, having learned from experience to be careful of the ever-moving extension of his spine and the many sharp points at the end of it. He continued to push his way through the giant flower patch until he finally broke through the edge of it and found himself out in the open air again. He stepped out from the confining plants and took a much-needed breath of air free from pollen.

A thick coat of the seed-bearing powder clung to the cervices of his scales all across his body, giving him the appearance of having large yellow splotches across his length. He parted his wings slightly before clapping them against his sides with a thunderous slap; the sheer force of the impact, combined with the wind generated from it, was enough to blow all the annoying powder off himself and send it scattering through the air in a flurry.

Then he looked out to the sight that greeted him; a sight that brought forth a wave of pleasant memories of the carefree days of fun and joy, long before the burdens of his many titles were bestowed upon his purple scales.

Winding through the northern woods to the ocean that he had left behind hours ago, its view of the crystal-clear waters only muddled by the rapids that warped the surface, was the small but mighty Brisby River. Named after a famous adventurer/hero of the Rodentkin Lands, it was nowhere near as large as the river that flowed through Feywild, but it was just as important and well-known a landmark to the Fae; according to the story, it was on these very banks that the younger Prince Oberon first encountered said adventurer and challenged him to a duel for the right to drink from the river first, only to lose to the mouse, who used his small size and quick-wit to send the young eladrin tumbling into the water like a drunken toad.

A story that was a favorite amongst the fairies and told throughout the palace to this day, much to the annoyed humor of the king himself.

It was also a place that held personal memories for the young dragon; the very riverbank he was standing on was once the sight of play and childhood joy for him. Appearance wise, the bank was by no means special, other than a large yet normal-sized oak tree that he was currently standing next to. Said tree grew out and over the riverbank and river, its branches already full of early-spring leaves, making it both the perfect shade during a hot day and a fun platform for jumping into the water from. His eyes fell to a spot near the base of the trunk facing him; there, clumsily carved into the bark near the roots, were the stick-figure etchings of a girl with wings and a small dragon jumping happily in play.

The letters 'S' and 'Z' had been carved above the dragon and fairy respectively, a small heart symbol sitting between said letters.

He could almost hear it in the rushing water: the distant sound of happy giggles and squeals accompanied by gurgling coos and yips. He could also almost see it as he looked back over the water: the sights of a purple dragon wyrmling, no bigger than a medium-sized dog and wide-eyed with happy wonder, and a young fairy child no older than eight, with messy brown hair in a loose-fitting, sleeveless flower-gown, splashing about in the shallows in

the light of the summer sun. Spraying each other with the cold, sparkling water, chasing after normal-sized frogs and crayfish through the reeds, and laying out in the grass to dry their muddy bodies off in the warm summer sun, only to eventually be dragged kicking and screaming to bubble baths by exhausted servants and tucked into warm beds for the cool summer nights.

The image of his past played out before his eyes, as if he was someone watching it from the sides, while his mind's eye saw it through the perspective of the young wyrmling. A soft warmth burned beneath the plated scales of his chest; a feeling that ached with longing yet was comforting and soft to his insides. A thrumming sigh escaped his nostrils, twin streams of smoke blowing from them.

It was beginning to feel like he was finally home now.

And with the recognition of this place, Spyro knew where he was now: his favorite spot was not far at all, no further than around the upcoming bend in the river. They would be there in but a minute or two...but as of that moment, what he wanted most was to quench the dryness of his throat. A few more minutes wouldn't hurt.

He stepped down to the edge of the river, his paws leaving deep saurian footprints in the mud, before crouching down and reaching out with his neck to dip his lower jaw into the water and drinking deeply of the flowing water. The icy-cold liquid flowed down his throat into his fiery stomach, a deep chilling sensation causing him to give a brief shiver: another sign of winter's passing. The snow had just melted off the ground and was now flowing off to the reclaimed by the distant sea. In fact, scattered across the distant banks of the river, he could see clumps of muddy snow bunched up along the water's edge; the last bits of winter clinging to the coldest parts of the earth they could, before they too would eventually melt away to the warmth of spring.

As he drank, Zoe flew up into the branches of their old tree, tucking the back of her skirts under her legs before sitting down on one of the larger branches; her wings folded behind her back like a butterfly in rest. She

simply leaned forward to watch the Safi'jiiva drink, content to simply sit and admire the awe-inspiring sight of her draconian charge.

And for a brief moment, things were looking like they could be good again.

Then the peace was shattered by a *very* unwelcome presence in the form of a sharp twinkling tone, like the music from a wind chime, singing out from within the confines her right skirt pocket; said pocket was glittering with a blue light that was just bright enough to glow through the fabric of the skirt, blinking in a rhythm almost matching a heartbeat.

Zoe's ears curled into angry downward hooks as a *very* displeased frown twisted her face; couldn't have given him so much as a single day to himself, huh?

Her reaction, however, was a child's pout compared to Spyro's. The Safi'jiiva's pupils narrowed into perfectly straight slits of anger as he glared backwards from his position at the fairy, the glowing fire within them once again licking all the way up to his eye-ridges as his lips twisted into an angry snarl that showed off *all* of his deadly teeth. A thunderous growl erupted from deep within him, vibrating through the earth and the very tree Zoe stood in, the branches quivering as if in their own fear of his wrath.

"They're probably just freaking out that we didn't return to Feywild." Zoe reassured him, a bit nervous about being in the sights of an upset dragon but understanding all too well why he was upset. She slipped a hand into her pocket to fish out the item in question. "I'll talk to them. Give me a moment to get them off our tails."

Spyro snorted in displeasure, but ultimately said nothing and returned to drinking from the river, though the water was bitter to the taste now.

Zoe gave him an apologetic look before she turned her displeased attention to the item now in her hand: a large sky-blue crystal that was cut in the shape of a flat hexagonal diamond. It glowed with its own sparkling light, while the air around it filled with a fine, almost pixie-dust like mist that twinkled in the sunlight. With a soft growl of her own, she flipped it over and tapped her thumb against the smoothed surface three times; this action

made the crystal's soft glow increase to a brilliant light. She then opened her hand, which allowed it the crystal to slowly rise into the air, until it was floating free at eye-level with her. Free from having to hold it, she made herself comfortable by leaning back against the trunk of the tree, grumpily folding her arms around her bosom as she watched the pixie dust come together around the crystal to form a single orb of white light floating in the air.

And from deep within the light orb, an image formed: first it was faded and blurry, as if surrounded by fog...but eventually the image cleared to reveal none other than King Oberon himself, sitting in his throne within the council room. Zoe's expression softened a touch when she saw the King of the Fair Folk; he was all but limp in his chair, the exhaustion and stress of the kingdom making him appear older than he actually was, his eyes closed as if asleep, but the farthest thing from it.

After a second or two, the eladrin opened his eyes and met hers through the Speaking Crystal, the direct line of communication between the king and the dragon fairy. *"Zoeandra Autumnleaf."* He said in greeting, his voice polite and strong despite his current appearance. *"You've grown since we last spoke."*

Zoe narrowed her eyes in mischief, unable to pass up the chance. "And you've gotten as saggy as an *elephant's ass*." She quipped without missing a beat. "Still look better than the rest of the Ca*lick-a-dick-a* Council, though."

As if on que, there were several cries of offense and outrage from Oberon 's end of the spell, many of the council members speaking out against the words the dragon fairy against them and their king. Oberon, on the other hand, only groaned in exasperation, rolling his eyes. *"I take back my previous statement."* He stated flatly. *"You may have gotten* older, *but you haven't matured a bit."*

"Oh, I've matured." Zoe said smugly as she brushed one of her locks behind her ear, only for it to fall out and hang back over the side of her face. "But neither you nor the court deserves to see it." Her smugness vanished as her expression hardened again. "Besides, you're not here for me, are you?"

"Let's get straight to the point and be done with it, then." The king said in agreement, adjusting himself in his throne. *"First and foremost: where in the hollow* are *you two?"*

"Along the banks of Brisby River." Zoe answered. "At the sandbank we use to play in, to be exact; by the old oak tree?"

There was a moment of silence, before recognition flashed across Oberon 's eyes. *"Ah, yes, I remember: your old 'swimming hole'."* He muttered thoughtfully. *"Why didn't you return to Feywild? We made many preparations for Jendovahzoor's return."*

Zoe spared a quick glance to the side; Spyro had paused drinking and was giving another draconian glare in their direction, as if daring either of them to say something he didn't want to hear. The dragon fairy shivered slightly, the piercing stare of his fiery eyes triggering every blood-rooted instinct within her to run for her life, even though she knew it wasn't really in danger. That's how powerful the influence of the Elder Dragons of Primordia was throughout all the realms...

"Spyro does not wish to return to the forest." She ultimately managed to say. "We're currently heading to the Le-."

"Watch your words, Autumnleaf!" The sudden voice of the Spriggan Representative shouted in the background of the spell. *"You disgrace our savior addressing him with the 'name' the mortals have sullied his glory with! You* will *address him as Jendovahzoor and* nothing less*!"*

Spyro growled under his breath at the spriggan's words.

Zoe was no less impressed than her dragon was. "*Spyro's* ass must taste of honeydew and rainbows if it's *that* delicious to kiss." She 'pondered aloud', more than enough so for everyone on the other end of the line to hear.

Despite his current anger, the young Safi'jiiva couldn't stop a huff of amusement from escaping his throat.

They both could imagine the spriggan's face going as red as his beard. *"YOU* DARE *SPEAK TO-?!"*

"ENOUGH, BOTH OF YOU!"

Oberon 's voice was as powerful and demanding as the crash of thunder, silencing everyone in the conversation quite effectively, as well as scaring a few of the birds roosting in the tree to the skies. *"*You *watch your* own *words, Spriggan! Zoeandra is Jendovahzoor's Dragon Fairy and said blessing grants her special privileges regarding interaction with the dragon!"* He then turned to her. *"Zoeandra, for the sake of addressing Jendovahzoor's current status*, please *keep at least* some *level of respect when speaking to the council."*

Said Dragon Fairy remained quiet for a moment. "...I will not make promises I don't intend to keep." She ultimately stated, earning a heavy sigh of exasperation from the Fairy King. "But as I was saying *before being rudely interrupted*: given that we just got back home after an *entire decade* of being away, *surely* you can understand that Spyro needs some time to familiarize himself with Nimh before doing anything else. We're currently on our way to the Lee of the Stone, near the old Fitzgibbons Ruins at the lake, where he wants to stay for a bit. *Without being disturbed*."

"I understand Jendovahzoor's desire to roam where he pleases, but we cannot simply ignore the changes his return will bring." Oberon told them, speaking in a manner that addressed them both, even if Spyro wasn't directly participating in the conversation. *"Our biggest concern right now is the fact the Rodentkin* will *eventually discover his existence, and the conflict that said discovery will bring to the entirety of Nimh."*

Spyro gave pause mid-drink to that comment.

Why was that an issue they worried about? Apart from Redbeard and his crew manning the Veil Piercer during the voyage, he had never encountered a native of the Rodentkin lands in all his life. Then again, in the entire half-a-century or so he had lived on Nimh, he had never set foot beyond the borders of Feywild, the Lee of the Stone being the furthest point from the palace they were allowed to go. And Rodentkin were outright forbidden

from entering Feywild's territory itself, with those that wandered too close to the forest for comfort were 'encouraged' by the patrols to leave altogether.

Had it been because of *him*? Oberon had just said he and the other fairies didn't want the rodents to find out about him; were they *that* focused about keeping him a secret from the world? And is so, why?

Was it because if they did, they wouldn't shower him with the overwhelming adoration that the fairies constantly gave him? Given that he was thoroughly sick of it by this point, a different reaction would be a welcomed change, as far as he was concerned...unless...they would react with fear instead? They always said the rodentkin were easily frightened by nature, and Elder Dragons were the most feared of all the creatures in the world.

Would they instead view him with horror and disdain, as if he was some great monster like the Titan Beasts?

*Like **they** had done?*

"Is that *really* so much an issue?" Zoe asked, subtlety aware that her charge had gone unnaturally silent. "The closest rodentkin settlement is Dapplewood, and that's on the very border of the Fae kingdom. The chances of him running into any is very low."

"Only if Jendovahzoor is to stay within the forest." Oberon said sternly. *"Which he has already proven he won't."*

Zoe cleared her throat, her next words spoken in an almost teaching tone, "'One cannot order a volcano to stop erupting when it decides to do so, nor ask the earth to stop shaking during an earthquake, as the *true* forces of nature bow to neither man nor magic. By the same reasoning, one cannot command the Sons of Akatosh from going where they will their wings to take them, nor stop them from breathing their flames where they wish'." She quoted with perfect memory, grinning like a cat afterwards. "*You* told me that the day I became Spyro's Dragon Fairy, remember?"

And despite the stress of his current situation, Oberon couldn't stop smiling himself. *"If only you gave as much dedication to common manners as you did your dragon."* He humored fondly at the memories. The lighthearted merriment of the moment didn't last, though; the smile fell from the king's face, which looked to take on several years of age in a few minutes, his eyes tired and regretful.

"What happened in the Dragons Realms? Where did it all go wrong?"

A cold silence filled the sandbank, with only the sound of the rushing waters of the river and the distant sounds of animal life throughout the plains to fill it.

Spyro didn't say a word as he sat at the edge of the river, the fire in his eyes cooling to a weak glimmer as he stared into the water with an unreadable expression. His wings sagged against his sides as his eyes met those within his own reflection, as if staring at another Safi'jiiva on the opposite side of the water. A long, thrumming groan rumbled up from his chest as he lifted his right hand and reached out to the water's surface, poking the image of himself with a single claw.

The ripples spread from the point of contact, distorting the water, and only confirming that his reflection was only that: his reflection...his image...him.

A creature forsaken by his own kind.

"The first dragons we introduced him to with were the Peacekeepers." Zoe said with a hollow voice, as if numbly reading off a written script, all the while watching her dragon with sorrowful pity. "They were the closest to the Elder Dragons of Primordia in terms of lifestyle, so we assumed they would be our best shot." She sadly shook her head. "We assumed too greatly. All the dragonesses of the realm rejected him, one by one, until we exhausted all possible candidates. Then the whole 'War of the Gnorcs' happened, and you know the rest of the story from there."

"Even those with wyrmlings of their own?" The Shimmerling Representative asked.

The dragon fairy snarled outright like a wild animal, bared teeth and all. "The ones *with* children were the most ferocious in doing so!" She snapped with spite. "They didn't want Spyro anywhere near them or their hatchlings! No matter how much we tried, no matter how well Spyro appealed to *his own kind*, they *refused* him at every nest!" She gave a heavy sigh and tried to calm herself, already feeling the effects of anger in her chest. "This continued throughout the rest of the realms: The Artisans, the Beastkeepers, the Magic-Crafters, hell, we even tried the *Dream Weavers*, for Akatosh's sake! But no one would take him...and it was *obvious* why."

"You must *be exaggerating the severity of the reactions."* The Grig Representative sniffed; Zoe could outright *taste* the smug doubt in his voice. *"Yes, the previous Purple Safi'jiiva may have...left a mark of dragon history, but even then, would* all *of dragon-kind feel the same way towards a single wyrmling?"*

"Agreed. The entirety of the realms couldn't have all shared a single animosity towards him; the Elemental Guardians of Warfang know him well enough to vouch for his moral heart." The Nixie Representative offered. *"Surely at least one dragoness would've stepped forward with their blessing?"*

"Exaggerating, am I?" Zoe growled dangerously. "Well then, would you all like to hear the new *title* they bestowed upon him during our little *adventure*?"

Spyro closed his eyes and lowered his head in defeat, not even bothering to brace himself for it; he had been called it so many times during the past ten years that its effect on him had faded into a dead numbness. Then, before Zoe even had a chance to say anything more, he spoke it himself:

"The Son of Malefor."

Dead. Silence.

Not a single word was spoken. Not a single sound was made. Even with his sharp draconian hearing, he couldn't even hear anyone take a single breath. No one dared to say anything. Zoe's face was cast in the shadow of her

locks, hiding her eyes from view, her mouth set in a tight-lipped frown. While Oberon, the Unshakable Eladrin King of Feywild Forest, could only stare at the dragon in silent, wide-eyed *horror*.

It remained that way for a good minute that felt like an eternity.

Then Spyro simply stood up on all fours, turned away from the tree, and left without a sound. The others could only watch as the last of his tail slowly disappeared into the tall grass.

Only after they felt that he was out of hearing range did Avalon speak again. This time, his once strong and proud voice was hollow and shaken, his mind still reeling from the knowledge it had received.

"We will give him all the time you need…" he said quietly, his own face downcast in defeated sorrow. *"If there's an emergency, or if he heads into Rodentkin lands, contact us. Until then, we won't bother him any further...I'm* sorry...*I* truly *am sorry."*

"…Thank you." Was all Zoe could bring herself to say.

The last thing she saw in the spell was the king of the fair folk sinking wearily into his throne, lifting a hand to cover his face in grief, before the image dissolved back into a flurry of pixie dust. She didn't say anything as she caught the Speaking Crystal before it could fall to the ground below; she stared at it in her hand, unsure whether to smash it against a large rock, chuck it into the river, or just break down and scream her emotions to the world then and there.

In the end, she slipped it back into her skirt pocket before sliding herself out of the tree, taking to the sky to follow after her dragon.

Chapter 6: Lee of the Stone

Chapter Text

The giant stalks fell around Spyro as he pushed his way through the last stretch of tall grass, using more force than was clearly necessary to do so; the drier brown stalks snapped against his body and fell in straight lines, while the softer green stalks were flattened and crumpled like paper under his footfalls. The drake's lips were curled into an angry, tooth-bearing snarl that shot smalls licks of hot orange flames from between his teeth with each growling breath, while his eyes still burned with the angry golden flames that now flowed across the sides of his head; fire in any form was a very dangerous thing to be breathing in the middle of a forest, but at the moment he was far too upset to care.

Any contentment he found at the riverbank was completely *gone*, leaving nothing but the tight emptiness that ached within his ribs for many years now. He had *finally* found a place to relieve himself of it at least a little, but all it took was the memories of his time in the realms (and his kin-bestowed title) to bring it all back.

He gave a wild snarl and slammed his head into the side of a small tree he was passing; the sheer force of the impact blew the very trunk apart in an explosion of splinters, sending the massive tree crashing to the ground with a thunderous crash.

What was it going to take to be rid of these horrible sensations within him?! He was finally back on Nimh. Nothing. He was free to roam wherever he pleased now. Barely a change. He visited one of the happiest places of his old life. Gone within the instant his time in the Realms, as well as his newly-bestowed title, made itself known again!

What did it want?! What did he *want?!*

"Calm down. you're going to burn down the entire field at this rate."

Spyro whipped around in a serpentine manner, his tail leveling an entire semi-circle of grass around him, and gave off an aggressive snarl at the owner of the voice. Zoe, who had been the one who spoke, only flinched a bit as she found herself at the receiving end of an angry dragon's temper; this was hardly the first time she had been, and she knew full well it wouldn't be the last. She waited patiently as he turned around fully, still growling and thrashing his tail like a wild animal, though the fire in his eyes was notably calmer than it had been before. At this point, he was just venting his frustrations, rather than actually acting with intent aggression, and she knew how to deal with a dragon throwing a tantrum.

"Easy now...*easy*." She repeated in a calming tone, keeping her voice soft and raising her hands to show she was unarmed. "There's no need for that. You know me."

The Safi'jiiva continued to growl, but over the course of a few heated seconds the growling slowly faded into a soft thrumming; the fire of his breath and eyes alike slowly died down to a low flicker, allowing the fairy to breathe a sigh of relief for the dozen-mile tinderbox they were standing on the edge of. Eventually, he calmed down enough for her to approach, allowing her to gently stroke the sides of his snout with her hands; the rough, scaly skin of his face was very warm to the touch, like the feeling of heated stone on a summer day, the essence of his fire burning hot within his bones.

A clear sign of his intense emotional distress.

"Oberon promised to leave us alone after you left and told us to take all the time we needed to heal." She told him quietly, resting her forehead against his; he shuddered with a warbling croon at the contact, but otherwise didn't object to it at all. "I *know* it's hard. I *know* what it feels like. And I know it seems it's never going to end...but it *will*. I *promise*."

Spyro's only response was to close his eyes and give a crackling warble of grief, the breath he exhaled long and hot with an almost weary flame...

...then he took another, and that's when he caught it: the barest hint of a scent.

He had been breathing through his mouth at the moment he did, expelling the excess body-heat caused from his emotional outburst, but just enough air passed through his sinuses to bring the scent through them. From there, his draconian sense of smell (unmatched by anything in the animal kingdom, even dogs and other saurians) easily picked it up amongst all the others, his eyes snapping open and all emotions instantly fading away as realization snapped him to attention:

They weren't alone in the field.

He quickly pulled away from Zoe's touch and turned toward the scent, sniffing the air in deep, slow intakes; the scent was much stronger now, filling his sinuses and forming the image of his target in his mind's eye, piece by piece:

Warm blooded flesh mixed with sun-warmed fur. Mammal.

Sweet hormonal scent. Female.

Said hormonal scent weak and underdeveloped. Child.

The artificial smell of fabric. Wore Clothing.

The supernatural glimmer of spiritual essence woven throughout the flesh. A *Soul Bearer*.

Spyro lowered his body to the ground and followed the scent with slow quiet footsteps, slinking through the long grass like a wolf on the hunt, taking care to make as little noise as possible. With every step he took the scent got stronger; whatever it was, it was closing in on it now.

Zoe watched in confusion, aware that he was on the trail of something, but unsure as to what it was. Potential prey, perhaps? Though judging from the suspicious look in his eyes, she doubted that.

The trail led them straight to the edge of the field. A large wall of thick green grass blocked their path, no doubt providing the perfect hiding spot for their mammalian intruder. The scent was as thick as fog now, and his

draconian eyes could make out a small ball of life aura quivering just behind the plants, while the soft patter of a rapid heartbeat brushed against his ears.

He was on top of it now.

Spyro's eyes narrowed in focus, zeroing in on the target. Then he took a final step forward, pushed his head straight through the thick grass wall...

Boop!

...and found himself snout-to-nose with a very young and very frightened mouse furling.

Spyro had been expecting a lot of things for the day he finally came across the Rodentkin of Nimh. An army of Fae-sized rats with swords and armor was the most common image he had imagined throughout his younger life. These images were always followed by daydreams of himself, fully grown and able to fly, swooping down upon the puny mortals and unleashing his fiery wrath upon them, blowing the entire army to ash in a single breath of flame. Such were the dreams of glory that all young dragons shared now and again.

Another had been one Zoe had told him during their younger days: the story of the mouse kingdom's capital city made entirely out of cheese. Of how every year the mice would end up eating the entire city to the ground, and then re-build it out of the finest cheddar, gouda, provolone, and cream cheese, only to eat it all over again. Of course, it was another one of her tall tales (a fairy tale, for a very fitting term), and she had gotten an earful from her mentors about 'filling the dragon's head with nonsense', but the image of an entire city made of food had been one that resurfaced every now and then, usually when he was hungry.

But this? This was *not* what he was expecting at all.

Neither of them made a sound as Spyro gently pulled back from the unexpected contact and raised his head up to full height, his eyes never breaking contact with those of the mouse before him. Likewise, the tiny

furling didn't dare look away from the massive reptilian beast poking its head out of the field's edge, her eyes wide with terror and her tiny body frozen on the spot; raising his head back up may have been a mistake, as it only emphasized how much bigger he was than her, which only added to her fear.

The dragon took the moment to observe the first mouse rodentkin he had ever seen (as all the rodentkin members of the Veil Piercer's crew had been rats). She had to be no older than a few years at most, no bigger than a human toddler, with a single incisor tooth barely peeking out from under her upper lip. A furling, if he recalled (the universal term for rodentkin young, regardless of species). Her fur was a soft sand-blonde in color, while her nose was a light pinkish brown. The only article of clothing she wore was a large teal-green sash that was wrapped around her midsection and tied behind her back in a big, poofy bow. And her chocolate-brown eyes were outright human in appearance, not anything like the black, glossy orbs of the animalistic Ferals, but windows into the sapient soul that made up her very being, full of awareness and emotion.

Though the only emotion that could be seen in them now was a deep, primal fear: the fear of standing before a great and terrible monster.

Curious of the new being he had never seen before, Spyro took a slow step forward, stepping partially out of the field and lowering his head down to get a closer look. The furling gave a frightened squeak as the dragon's head approached her; she tried to back away but ended up stumbling over her own paws with the natural clumsiness of children her age, tumbling backwards in a way that reminded Spyro of tumbleweed; a small, chubby furball of a tumbleweed. He pulled away again in surprise at the sudden tumble, finding himself outright concerned for her well-being, but the mouse looked unharmed as she pushed herself up into a sitting position.

The two didn't say a word or move a muscle after that, each staring at each other in complete silence.

The moment was promptly interrupted when Zoe flew out from the grass, confused as to what was keeping Spyro in one spot. "What is it? What did

you find?" She asked him in a concerned manner as she pushed the stalks aside. "Is it a thr-?"

It was then she spotted what had captured the dragon's attention, and her own eyes went wide, but with a different kind of horror.

"Oh, *Sard* Me!"

Spyro immediately whipped his head to his fairy and gave a loud, snarling hiss of disapproval; despite being inexperienced in the matters of handling children, even he knew using vulgar language in their presence was frowned upon, and Zoe's natural dismissal of common decency was no excuse. This, however, would prove to be a mistake: the sight of the Safi'jiiva's jaws opening and his lips curling back to reveal all his sharp flesh-tearing teeth, along with the thunderous bone-chilling growl finally snapped the mouse out of her stupor; she gave a truly terrified scream, scrambling to her feet as if the ground she was sitting on caught fire, and bolted away as fast as all four of her paws could carry her.

"W-Wait, come back!" Zoe called after her: not out of concern for the child, but out of the need for answers.

Spyro, on the other hand, was very much taken aback by the extreme reaction to him; he gave a calling croon after the furling, as if pleading for her to return, as he stepped fully out of the field and began to follow her, his long strides allowing him to keep pace with the young rodent even as she ran. This did little to calm her down, as when she looked behind her all she saw was the sharp-toothed monster coming out of the grass, revealing just how much bigger than her it truly was, and chase her down to catch and swallow her whole.

She shouldn't have looked back, otherwise she would've seen the large fallen branch of a nearby giant tree coming up in her path, and the sharp twig sticking out over said path like the deadly claw of a predator in waiting.

Before anyone could react, she had run past it and the twig struck her across her right shoulder, its sharp tip slashing it open.

A pained squeak escaped her as she tripped over herself, falling into the dirt. Spyro abruptly stopped at the sight of the sudden tumble, a light jolt of panic coursing through his chest when he saw a flash of red.

Then it hit him: a smell that slithered through his nostrils, filling his sinuses in the most pleasant way. Sweet. Warm. *Fresh*. The smell of *prey*. A smell that he, as a predator, welcomed as mortals would welcome the smell of freshly baked bread. He was promptly reminded that water wasn't the only thing he hadn't had since the previous night when an all-too familiar emptiness in his stomach made itself known, rumbling hungrily for warm flesh. Saliva dripped from his fangs as his pupils narrowed into tight slits, all instinct and desire joining to seek out and devour the source *of such a divine and succulent-**NO!***

With a warbled bark of distress, he quickly banished those involuntary desires from his mind, taking a step back as he shook his head from side to side in an animalistic manner, all the while snorting fire through his nostrils several times to clear the scent from his sinuses. By the Flames of Akatosh, that was the flesh of a *Soul Bearer* he was hungering for! A fellow sapient being, and an innocent child at that! Only the wicked and the unforgivable were allowed to be consumed in the name of Justified Vengeance; to consume the flesh of an *innocent* soul bearer was a sin that all carnivorous soul-bearing races, not just dragons, were forbidden from indulging in. He recoiled mentally in self-disgust, outright shaken by how potently the temptation had flared within him, shaking his head several more times with angry snarls.

Only when the smell completely cleared his head did he gain hold over his senses again, and the first thing he became aware of was the sound of crying.

He looked over to see the furling laying on the ground, curled up in the fetal position and sobbing her eyes out. A large red scratch had been torn across her upper arm, which she clutched with her other paw, blood trickling over her fingers and down the wounded limb; large, round tears spilled from her eyes, rolling down her face and dripping off her whiskers as she wept like it was the end of the world.

Now Spyro was no stranger to such feeling, though it had been many years since such an injury brought out such a powerful reaction; only the very young and inexperienced would react so strongly to such a minor wound. Large as the scratch was, only the skin had been broken, hardly what one would call life-threatening. To one who lived through the terrible glory of war, and all the pain and injury that came with it, seeing one react so violently to something so small was rather insulting.

At least…that's what he *thought* he should've been feeling.

But there was something about seeing someone so young…so small…so *untouched* suffering like this, even from something so minor...it caused a strange nagging feeling in his chest; not like the Tight Emptiness, as it didn't dig inwards. Instead, it felt as if it was…*reaching*. For the mouse girl. A want to do…*something*: something to stop her from feeling pain and sorrow, but not in a way that would harm her even further.

To soothe her pain, and his own would be soothed as well…

He shifted uncomfortably where he stood, tail swishing back and forth impatiently and a frustrated grumble spilling forth as he struggled to understand this new sensation. His movements snapped the mouse out of her bleary-eyed confusion, her teary eyes widening in fear as she remembered the monster. Holding her wounded limb to her chest, she quickly got back up on her three good legs and ran in a limping gait, slower than before but no less panicked.

This time, Spyro didn't follow her right away; instead, he simply stood there and watched with a mix of unpleasant alien emotions as the furling fled into the woods on the edge of the field he had just left, running zig-zag through the grass in an attempt to lose her perceived pursuer, all the while leaving a visible trail of red drops behind her.

He waited until she was fully out of sight before he stepped forward once more, now concerned for her survival in these predator-filled parts of Feywild.

Something soft and cushioned pressed against the bottom of his right forepaw with said step; he stopped and lifted his paw to see what he had stepped down. There, slightly pressed into the ground within his footprint, was a small, hand-knitted ragdoll, not unlike a teddy bear, with reddish-brown cloth skin and black button eyes. He hopped back a bit and lowered his head, sniffing the doll; the furling's scent was so deeply ingrained into the toy that it *had* to be hers. She must've dropped it while fleeing from him. He nudged it gently with his snout, a soft groaning croon rumbling from his throat…before he gingerly picked it up between his teeth by its arm and lifted his head back to full height, turning his attention back to where the furling had fled: an easy enough path to follow given the trail she left behind.

Brow-ridges furrowing at the sight of the spilled life-liquid, the Safi'jiiva turned his attention to the branch that had harmed the innocent child; the offending twig glimmering red in the midday sun, like the blade of a sword that just made a fresh kill, almost as if it was *boasting* about its ability to cause harm.

Eyes flashing with rage, Spyro promptly lifted his hind leg and *slammed* his foot upon the offending piece of wood; the sheer impact of the blow shook the earth around the area, leaving the branch outright crushed to sawdust. The Elder Dragon drake gave a snort of satisfaction before setting off towards the Lee of the Stone once more, following the trail in an outright serpentine manner; he weaved in and out between the trees like a giant snake, while he used his wings to grip their trunks to pull himself along like a third set of limbs, leaving long claw marks in their bark, all the while his eyes never left the trail of blood.

And given the direction it was laying in, it wasn't hard to guess as to where the furling was heading…

There weren't enough words in all the languages in the world to describe just how utterly *swived* they were.

While Spyro was following the winding trail of blood through the woods with unwavering attention, Zoe was experiencing what could only be

described as a full-brain aneurysm exploding in her skull. They had *literally* just gotten back, the sun not even at its noon peak yet, and they had already just stepped right into plunging all of Nimh into chaos. What in the Seven Realms was a *furling* doing all the way out *here*?! And *this* close to the forest's borders, no less?! She had literally just gotten done receiving the request from King Oberon himself to keep Spyro away from the Rodentkin, and not even a full *sarding* ***minute*** after did they just happened to stumble across one so deep into Feywild that she was surprised nobody had noticed a *kingdom-wide cheese shortage*!

She slapped her hands against her cheeks, snapping herself out of her panicked exaggerations and clearing her head to rationalize what she had just discovered. A mouse furling in Feywild: how could this have happened? She furrowed her brow in thought, thinking hard on any possible explanations.

First that came to mind: she was a very, ***very*** lost child, having wandered a little too far from the Rodentkin settlement of Dapplewood...and was about a three-to-four-day trip by foot from the forest's edge.

Yeah, that was completely impossible, even by her imagination. Even if such a young furling had the physical strength to 'wander' *that* far away from the nearest rodentkin settlement without food or rest, she wouldn't have made it *this* far. The wilderness of Feywild was *crawling* with predators: many of the more magical species of Nimh's native animals lived in the fairy-inhabited areas of the continent, most of which were more than capable and willing to greedily devour lost furlings in a single bite. She would've been monster dung long before she even left sight of Dapplewood.

Zoe scratched her head as she tried to think of another alternative…perhaps she was with Mr. Ages? An elderly mouse that had history with the Fae, and thus was the only rodentkin that had been welcomed to live in Feywild; the ruins that he had set up shop in wasn't far from the Lee of the Stone at all, making her presence plausible if that was the case.

Perhaps this was his distant grandniece or something, having been dropped off by unnamed relatives for the spring, so far away from inhabited rodent lands that it might as well have been the other side of the world.

Oh, who was she kidding? Old Man Ages was the personification of antisocial personality disorder. The cranky old mouse had moved to Feywild *counting* on the fact that he wouldn't be bothered by other rodentkin; in all the centuries he traveled across Nimh, he had not once taken a mate or had children. And if he had any siblings, he would be the last mouse in the world that they would trust to look after their children for whatever reason.

That meant the third idea was only one plausible answer. One that made as much dread as it did sense: a clan of rodentkin had entered and settled down in Feywild.

And given the direction the furling had been running in, she had a *very* bad feeling as to *where* they had settled.

The scratching became more furious as the weight of this realization made itself known, her fingers outright clawing at her scalp. *How* could this have happened?! Ever since Spyro's birth, the already anti-rodentkin mentality of Feywild only *skyrocketed* in strength; not a single mouse or rat (which the exception of the pre-mentioned Mr. Ages, and even he was unaware of the elder dragon's existence) was allowed *anywhere* in Fae territory, let alone *this* close to the forest itself! Even Dapplewood was under heavy patrol from the border guard to ensure not a *single* non-fairy inhabitant of Nimh crossed over, and they were literally on the border!

If the Council found out about this new colony, it could very well be the tipping point of the already-fragile peace with the Rodentkin, and the excuse needed to plunge all of Nimh into *war*!

She sighed wearily, dragging her hands down her face in exasperation; was it *really* too much to ask for even a *single* break from it all? Just for *one day*, even?

She pulled her hand down to her lower face, allowing her to open her eyes and glare in front of her as they walked into the cast shadow of another obstacle. Before them stood a set of massive bushes, each larger than Spyro himself and forming a wall that extended beyond sight to the left and right alike. The light of the mid-morning sun was shining through the holes in the

brush, casting small beams of light upon the otherwise shaded area behind it.

Zoe recognized this wall; it was the berry bushes that lined the glade where the Lee of the Stone stood. Many a late summer/early fall was spent gorging on their juicy produce, which wasn't due to grow until that time of year, leaving the bushes bare of fruit. She watched as Spyro leaned forward to look through the holes in the wall, but the sun was at an angle that made its light shine directly in his dark-adjusted eyes, forcing him to pull back and blink in discomfort, growling softly in frustration.

Then he stepped forward and began to push through the bushes, bark creaking and leaves shifting about as he shoved his way into them.

She was *not* going to allow her dragon to suffer under the cruelty of war again. He had just gotten away from one that nearly killed him; to go right back into another, let alone on Nimh, would be the breaking point for his morale, Elder Dragon of Primordia or not. Her eyes glistened with an icy-blue aura of their own and her pupils narrowed into reptilian slits as silently followed Spyro. Oberon and the Council would never have to know that these mice were here in the first place. To get this far meant you had to be a small enough colony to make it pass the border patrol; a few mice with even iron weapons were no match for the cunning and trickery of even the simplest and weakest fairies in all of Feywild.

And she was, by far, no means simple nor weak.

She would deal with these intruders herself. Even if it meant *dragging their corpses back to the border herself.*

With an irritated growl, Spyro pushed his way through the tightly-packed wall of bushes before him, his eyes squinting against both the sunlight and the leaves brushing across his face. The smaller branches snapped against his scaled hide, absolutely no match against his strength, while the low-hanging leaves and twigs were either pushed aside by or flattened under his paws. He blinked both sets of eyelids several times as he stepped out from

the darkness, hissing angrily in irritation at the stabbing sensation from his eyes.

And only when his vision finally cleared, was he able to see just how much had changed in ten years.

The open grassy fields that he remembered from his childhood were completely gone, and in its place was a wall of giant cornstalks, leaving only a narrow path barely big enough for a rabbit between them and the bush wall. The stalks were earless and had yet to grow their golden crowns, as expected of early spring crops, but were already standing almost forty feet in height (no doubt in thanks to Feywild's magically-enriched soil), towering over the dragon. He stared up at the wall of crops in silent surprise, racking his simple reptilian brain trying to register the new addition to the once empty plains of his memories. They were so tall and thickly-packed that he could barely made out the distant shape of the Stone looming beyond them.

He was so focused on staring up at the corn that he almost stepped on another addition to the glade: a crudely-made wooden fence that stood barely taller than his wrist, no doubt constructed by the smaller mice rodentkin, made from gathered branches and tied together with rope. It was outright humorous how small it was; whoever built it actually expected it to keep anything out of the farmland, when most creatures were more than tall enough to simply step over it.

Which is exactly what he did; adjusting his jaws around the arm of the doll to make sure he wasn't damaging it with his teeth, Spyro slinked low to the ground and slipped into the farmland as silently as he could, his body and tail outright slithering over the fence and into the cornfield.

If they had been traversing through an open grassland, the royal-purple color of Spyro's scales would've been terrible at providing camouflage against the golden-brown fields, but within the shadows of these cornstalks it was surprisingly effective, like the black fur of a panther in the dark jungle. He blended almost perfectly into the shade of the plants as he slithered in a straight line for the shape of the Stone, only changing direction when stepping around a stalk directly in his path. Likewise, Zoe

had to take to walking by foot through the trail he left behind, taking care to prevent the leaves from whipping her in the face; fairy wings glowed when they were in use and thus flying would've give away their position immediately, forcing her to take to the ground.

A familiar smell reached his nostrils, causing him to pause mid-step, and his glowing eyes cast their gaze down to the base of the stalk to his right. A glimmering smear of red coated the surface of the plant, next to a trail of tiny footprints leading in the same direction he was heading. He was almost amused at the painfully-obvious trail she had left behind; for those living in the heart of Feywild's wilderness, they did a poor job of keeping themselves hidden from predators. Even a blind fox could follow a trail like this…then again, she was just a child.

But it proved his gut instinct correct; the furling's family was indeed here. At the Lee of the Stone.

He gave a soft croon and wisely continued on before the smell could take his mind again, taking precaution to avoid touching the spilled life-fluid as he passed it. A quick glance to the sky through the cornfield canopy told him that he was nearing the stone, and through the distant stalks he could see brief but sharp flashes of sunlight reflecting off a surface of glass…the window to a farmhouse, perhaps?

And no sooner had he seen the glint of light did another sign of inhabitants reach his senses, this time his ears, which perked up as they detected them: Voices. Several distinct ones. It was hard to tell the exact age and gender, but they sounded like more children. The furling's siblings, perhaps? Or other children of this new colony?

Spyro slunk as low as he could to the ground as he approached the edge of the cornfield; so low his underbelly was just shy of actually dragging across it. The few blades of grass between the stalks, as well as the fallen strips of corn leaves, brushed against his scales as he slinked forward like a giant cat, not making a sound. He willed his eyes to lower the intensity of their glow, becoming no brighter than the flickering embers of a dying campfire, keeping himself hidden as he peered out from between the stalks that lined the edge of the field.

It almost felt like a dream, looking out from the darkness of the past decade and out into the light of a distant memory come to life. Even if said memory had been changed drastically from what he remembered it to be.

The Lee of the Stone was one of the most recognizable landmarks in central Feywild: a single massive stone larger than a small castle, standing tall in the center of a bank-side glade, curving out of the earth in an almost claw-like formation towards the west and forming a cave-like outcrop that cast a natural cover over the ground beneath it. The stone's withered yet mighty appearance was a testament to its age, having stood undisturbed in this spot for thousands of years; moss covered the surface area in scattered clumps, while wild vines and roots hung in the air from off the edges, swaying lazily in the soft breeze. The area facing the stone's cliff-face was an open grassy field devoid of trees and bushes (or at least used to be an open grassy field), leading down all the way to the distant river's edge, which flowed past the glade in an outward curve.

All of this was a very welcome sight to the home-weary Safi'jiiva. The perfect sunning spot for any large reptile: a warm stone surface to nap on, and a comfortable shaded area to slip under if it got too hot. Even at his current size, the stone was still more than large enough from him to use.

He could feel the warm stone on his belly already.

But then he saw what was sitting in the shade beneath it, and any good-natured curiosity he held instantly *vanished*.

Standing right at the base of the great stone, tucked comfortably in the shade underneath the curving ledge above, was the picture-ese definition of a rodentkin farmhouse. The majority of the building was buried within the earth, carved in stone, with only the upper half emerging from the surface; this was normal for rodentkin, being a partially-subterranean race that built their homes underground to hide from predators. The layer of dirt and grass covering the surface of the block-shaped stone emphasized this, clearly done so make it look like part of the glade. Though a soul-bearer would recognize the telltale clues: the small chimney poking out of the ground puffing a small wafting column of smoke, the simple door made of wooden plants lashed together with twine hidden within a shallow burrow in the

side of the 'hill', and large round windows that were partially obscured by overhangs of grass. One could easily compare it to the dwellings of hobbits, albeit made with more primitive materials and more focused on protection from outside dangers rather than over-indulgence in comfort.

And gathered in front of the burrow where the door was hidden were some of the inhabitants of this mousey hobbit-hole: three mice furlings, confirming themselves to be the source of the voices he had been hearing as they spoke amongst themselves. The young, blonde-furred girl was in the middle, softly sobbing in the embrace of another furling as she clutched her bleeding arm.

The one holding her was a much older furling girl wearing a patchy, sleeveless dress that was a pale lavender in color; the blonde one's sibling, he guessed, given how openly-loving she was acting for the younger mouse. Her fur was a very light chocolate-brown, almost grey, with a lighter countershaded snout and underbelly. Her ears were concealed by a large pink bow she wore in her hair, which was not unlike the bow tied around her sister's waist. Her eyes were a bright sky-blue in color, rather than the dark-brown of her sister's, while her nose was a dark pink.

The second was a chubby boy furling that was probably only a year or two younger than the older girl, with fur that was a light-grey in color with a near-white countershade on his belly. The only clothing he wore was a plain blue shirt that was tucked lightly against his fur, almost too small to fit around his chubbier frame. His eyes were brown like the youngest, while his nose was a darker reddish-brown. He seemed more focused on finding the source of his sister's injury rather than comforting her, patrolling the small area like a watchman on duty, swinging a stick he held with his paw as if it was a sword.

…and…that was all of them.

Spyro blinked both sets of eyelids in a reptilian manner as realization struck him full force: there was only *one* house. And there was only *one* set of furling siblings on the farm.

This wasn't a colony. This was a *single family* of mice!

What in the Great Fire of Akatosh was *one* family doing all the way out here, within fair-folk borders, separated from the rest of rodent-kind by several days' worth of distance? A colony he could understand, as that meant numbers and reinforcement to protect themselves from danger, but a single set of two adults had no means to fight off the more dangerous predators of the wild. Unless there was some sort of hidden magical means to protect themselves (which was unlikely as only rodentkin royalty were wealthy enough to afford magical training) they were a literal buffet just waiting for hungry monsters to show up, even when hidden under the protection of the Stone...

The Stone...

...***His*** Stone.

In the darkness of the shadows, the glow of his eyes shone through like piercing blades of light at that thought, his lip curling back into a tooth-baring snarl as he growled angrily. All the places they could've settled down...all the potential spots in all of Feywild they could've chosen to invade...and it just *had* to be under his stone. Didn't it? *Why did he expect* ***anything else at this point?***

Any sensation of curiosity or empathy that he had felt for these newcomers up to this point quickly crumbled away as another sensation forced its way through them with a fiery vengeance. One far more ancient and powerful than simple moral emotions, one he was far more familiar with, and one that was well known and feared through the cosmos by men and gods alike:

The jealous, *burning*, *all-consuming* ***Wrath of a Dragon***.

She could feel the power hitting her body even before she saw the glow come from within his body.

Zoe's eyes widened in dread, and she quickly fluttered backwards into the inner cornfield (which was, admittedly, a very bad place to take shelter from Dragon Fire), pushing herself through the stalks off the original path and putting several dozen feet between herself and her dragon. Spyro's snarling

visage was so angered and filled with hate that it could kill a fully-grown behemoth with mere eye-contact alone; a rumbling fire was blazing in his lungs, shining through the edges of his scales, and forming a spiderweb of fiery light across the length of his underbelly.

His claws dug tightly into the ground, leaving long scratches in the dirt...which began to glow with brilliant blue streaks of lightning-shaped cracks that spread out from his paws.

Before the fairy's eyes, the very life-energy within the surrounding earth itself began to drain from it, flowing out through the cracks to be absorbed directly into the Safi'jiiva's body, through the bottom of his paws. The cornstalks around him began to shrivel and wilt, their lush green flesh turning brown and cracked as the very years were sucked out of them and into the Elder Dragon's body, fueling his power and rage alike. The doll that he had been carrying fell from his jaws and landed on the dead ground with a soft thump, now missing half of its arm to the flames.

And the final pièce de resistance: his eyes. Having changed from a vibrant gem-like purple outlined by bright gold into a solid golden-orange, akin to the glow of fire, his pupils narrowing into perfectly straight slits.

She couldn't stop the weary sigh of disappointment from escaping her lips, and she shook her head softly. Honestly, she was surprised he had the emotional fortitude to hold out for this long. Perhaps it was seeing his favorite stone taken over by mortals that was the final straw. After everything he had gone through before: waiting too long to embark on a venture to find a potential emotional anchor, followed by a rushed attempt met with failure and a war against the green-skins for the sake of said failure, he had finally reached the boiling point. And without the anchor to fall back to, the final stage would be the one that Oberon and his kingdom had worked *so hard* to avoid…

But regardless of when and why, the future of the Purple Dragon was set once again: the mistakes of the past had been repeated. The exile into darkness complete.

And if they were *extremely lucky*, some of them might actually make it out alive.

…oh well...at least it would be quite the final show.

Spyro slowly swung his heavy head from side to side, flames licking the sides of his jaws and hot embers billowing from his nostrils, as if trying to physically break the conflict of Sapient Empathy versus Primal Instinct raging within his mind, raging as hot and ferociously as the fire in his lungs. It was all he had to keep himself from bursting forth from his hiding place in a violent rampage. To rush the ***thieves*** and send them fleeing for their lives. To unleash his flames upon this entire farm and burn everything that had ***twisted*** his stone to the ground, even as the leaves around him began to crumble into dust and liter the earth in dead soot.

The world had taken enough from him already. First being forsaken by his own kind, then dragged into a war that had nothing to do with him, forced to fight against a cruel and violent enemy with weapons designed to hurt as much as possible as they killed, and then finally winning the war, proving his truth to the world a dozen times over, only to be cast back out by the very ones he saved!

Was everything he endured not enough?! Was he not even allowed to have this *one thing* to soothe the Tight Emptiness?!

The front door to the farmhouse opened with a soft creaking of wood; the Safi'jiiva's burning eyes instantly locked on the barrow and narrowed dangerously, his rage focusing on the two new rodentkin that made their presence known.

The first was a completely different subspecies of rodentkin altogether: a fat old shrew with shaggy gray fur and a face that had withered by time to resemble that of a crocodile, albeit with far less teeth. She was perhaps the most dressed out of the entire group, with a faded-blue apron tied around her pear-shaped body, a purple scarf around her neck, and a pale-peach cap around her head. She carried a bundle of white bandages in her arms,

huffing up the steps out of the burrow as she did so; no doubt meant to dress the injury the youngest furling had endured.

His eyes narrowed in impatient thought; there was no way a shrew was the biological parent of mice furlings. Even when not accounting for her age, which was well past that of bearing children, it was impossible for the different sub-species of rodentkin to inter-breed. Inter-marry, yes, but such unions would never bear fruit. Either a married member of the family or a friend of it.

That scraggly old rodent couldn't possibly be *the one*...

Another rodent followed the shrew from within the burrow, their form hidden both within the shadow of the door frame and behind the bulbous frame of the whiskery hag. His eyes erupted into brilliant flames as they locked onto the concealed *vermin*, a deep, guttering growl rumbling from his throat and through his bared teeth.

That was *the one*: The parent of the furlings. *The one* who brought their family to the stone.

The one who had stolen ***what was rightfully his.***

NO!

This was *his* home! *His* Lee of the Stone! It was his *long* before any of *them had even been born! They had* no *right to claim it as their own!*

He was ***done!*** *Done letting these mice, these fairies, the other dragons, the gnorcs, the* ***very world itself*** *take what it would from him, as if he was* ***nothing*** *more than a* ***diseased beggar*** *!*

He was Jendovahzoor! He was the Son of Akatosh and Lord of the Elements himself! And he would endure this torment and humiliation ***no longer*** *!*

He was going to take it back…take **all** ***of it back!***

AND IF THAT MEANT HE HAD TO SWALLOW ALL THE REALMS IN HIS FLAMES, SO BE I-!

The rodent revealed herself, and as she did so the wounded furling cried out a single, pained, pleading word:

"Mommy!"

And with that one word…it all *ceased*.

As if suddenly submerged at the bottom of the ocean, the burning flames suddenly…*dispersed*, vanishing into empty smoke. The fierce cosmic glow within his body snuffed out like the flame of a candle, leaving nothing but a small area of dead farmland hidden within the field. The rising fire in his throat caught as the dragon froze mid-breath, remaining still as stone for a good several seconds, before the flames slowly retreated back down his trachea and dispelled within his lungs. And his eyes, wide with a mix of several emotions, slowly returned to their soft purple shine.

He didn't notice the change in his eyes. Nor did he notice his fire dying down or the smoke fading into the sky above him. He didn't even notice as Zoe, who was shocked silent herself at the sudden change, take a hesitant step toward him from behind.

Everything else seemed to fade away around him, his eyes locked on the final newcomer.

She was a young-adult mouse rodentkin, hardly any bigger than the eldest of the children…*her* children, he realized. He could see the resemblance to them: her fur was a very light brown as well, reminding the dragon of the color of chocolate milk, with lighter brown countershade across her belly, torso, face, and around her eyes, while her nose was the same color as the oldest furling's. She wore a simple farm dress with a dark-red corset, white sleeves and neck, and a dark pink skirt; the dress was worn and used, with tears and holes along the edge of the skirt and patchwork on the sleeves; signs of a hard yet happy lifestyle. And around her shoulders she wore a patchy-wool cloak that was a bright red in color, the edges worn and tattered in places.

But the feature that stood out the most were, by far, her eyes: very pretty sky-blue eyes, and full of a strong…*warmth*; the soft shyness in her

expression and the timid uncertainty in her posture were completely eclipsed by it.

Spyro couldn't tear his own eyes away from them.

He watched in outright captivated attention as the mouse mother quickly made her way to her injured child, carrying a small clay jar in her paws. She took a seat on a root next to the house, wordlessly beckoning the blonde furling to her; the tiny mouse pulled away from her sister's hold and allowed herself to be scooped up into the loving embrace of her mother's arms. After a few seconds of comfort, she set her child on her lap and held her close as she dipped her paw into the jar; she scooped out a small dollop of what looked like honey with her fingers, using her other hand to hold out the child's wounded arm. The furling whimpered in dreadful anticipation, but her mother gave her a reassuring hum before she slowly and gently smeared the honey-stuff over the wound.

A pained squeak escaped the furling's mouth as she jerked against the contact, large tears rolling down her eyes as what Spyro now assumed to be medicine no doubt stung the exposed flesh.

A sensation the dragon was all too familiar with himself…

Then a new sound reached his ears, and his world was shaken yet again. As the furling cried from the pain, her mother comforted her as she cleaned the wound by softly humming a song to her child; a soft, beautiful song that bloomed with a loving warmth that seemed to make all the pain go away. The child's sobs slowly died to timid sniffles, and she relaxed to the touch, as if the song itself had the power to soothe the pain.

It was so simple…so ordinary…so forgettable. By no means a song that even the lowest of bards would consider playing, let alone the legendary scores performed by the royal musicians of Feywild.

It was one of the most beautiful things Spyro had ever heard in life.

It was like the call of a siren to him; the warmth in that voice…it outright clawed at the tight emptiness within his ribs, hooking onto his insides from

within and tugging on them in her direction. As if she had the means to fill the emptiness. To finally put an end to the accursed emotional torment in his gullet and bring forth the sense of peace that he had endured for so many years.

But he dared not move from the spot. For another, darker sensation held him in place; the knowledge of what he was, and how they would see him…and what he had done.

It was then that he finally mustered the strength to look away from the warmth and turn his gaze to the desolation around him; he recoiled a bit at the sight, shifting back a step as he truly took in the sight of what his wrath had done to their home.

The small area of the field around him, once full of healthy green cornstalks ready for the light of summer, was now a testament to the destruction of his wrath. The stalks standing in the radius of him, once filled with youthful life, looked as if they had been aged hundreds of years in mere seconds, their once healthy leaves withered and crumbling away. The ground around him was covered in dead plant matter and the soil was a dusty sand color, as the very dirt itself had been drained of the life-giving force of the planet itself. Nothing would be able to grow in this spot for a *very* long time. And before him, covered in the dead soot and part of its arm burned off, was the small doll that was his original reason for following the furling, now permanently damaged and dirty.

That doll…these gardens…this very home...they had all been made by that mother mouse and her husband…the furlings' father…to give them and themselves a home. A strong roof to protect them from the dangers of the world. Warm food to fill their bellies. A lifetime of warmth-filled memories that they would carry on to their own children…all made with the same warmth she held for them.

And he had been mere seconds from *burning it all to the ground.*

What. Just. *Happened?*

That was the only thing Zoe could even bring herself to think as she stared at her dragon in stunned, disbelieving silence, unable to bring herself to comprehend the sudden *transformation* that took place before her very eyes. She had been so certain that this was it: the final straw that would've broken the camel's back and bring forth the wrath and ruin of the Aetherian Safijiiva upon the world once more. In that one great, terrible, potentially-apocalyptic moment he was a living inferno of fiery draconian rage, ready to destroy everything the intruding mice had built within his glade, and most likely bring about the next Great Cleansing after.

But then…in nothing more than a *split second* of time…he was not.

The wrath of the purple dragon…the rage and hate and pain of ten years…just *gone*. *Vanished* into thin air. Replaced with an outright hypnotic wonder in his eyes, which never strayed from the sight before him.

She never would've believed it had she not just seen it with her own eyes; the fairy wasn't even aware the emotions of dragons could be so strongly influenced in such a manner. She was currently standing several feet away deeper into the cornfield to Spyro's left, and thus was unable to see what had captured his attention so vividly, as if hypnotized by whatever he saw.

Was it something about the Rodentkin? What was going on? What did they do?

Then, as if the spell had been shattered, Spyro took a step back and looked about the area his power had drained when he was about to blow, seeing the damage he caused for the first time. To Zoe, it was nothing to think about; areas being destroyed by a dragon's power, be it fire or otherwise, was a common occurrence when dealing with said dragons…but Spyro looked outright *shaken* at the sight, as if he had done something horribly wrong. A pathetic gurgling whimper escaped the young Safi'jiiva's jaws as he sank to the ground, his body shivering animalistically as he curled in on himself, squeezing his eyes shut as if he was trying to hide away from the world.

The deep-rooted instincts of a Dragon Fairy flared in her blood at the sight, and she was rushing to his side without a second thought, using her wings to flutter-hop across the ashen floor and land next to his head.

"What happened? Are you alright?" she asked, reaching out a hand to touch him.

Spyro's eyes snapped wide open, and he was back on his feet in an instant, jumping like a startled animal caught off guard. Zoe quickly jumped back at the movement herself, putting a respectful distance between herself and the distressed dragon, holding her hands up to show she meant no harm; when he realized who she was he relaxed, guttering a deep reptilian sigh akin to the heavy breathing of a crocodile.

He turned his gaze back to the sight of the stone's new inhabitants, staring at the scene with a mix of emotions glowing in his eyes:
sadness...guilt...uncertainly…

…and…*longing*.

Zoe blinked in surprise. Longing? That was an emotion she hadn't seen him express since they were first told they would be going home. She followed his gaze to the small house at the base of the stone; to finally see what on earth could possibly cause such a reaction with-.

That's when she finally saw her: the mother of the furlings, who had just just finished wrapping the youngster's arm in the bandages that the shrew had brought out, adding the finishing touches to the dressing; to top it off, she placed a soft kiss on the bandaged wound, as if to will the pain way through love. It might not have done anything to truly nurse the wound, but the furling's tears dried from the loving act, none the less. The mother mouse smiled the warmest, most loving smile the fairy had ever seen in her entire life before she scooped up the child in a warm, protective hug.

The very image of a mother's love.

Oh.

Oh.

"Don't."

Spyro turned his saddened gaze back to Zoe, emitting a soft, almost pleading croon. Zoe, however, sadly shook her head. She knew what would happen if he tried, and it would only end in pain.

"You are a dragon, one of the mighty Akatosh. They are Rodentkin, mortal and fearful of all with sharp teeth…" She told him softly, gently caressing the end of his snout. "…And a dragon's teeth are very, *very* sharp."

To that, Spyro simply lowered his head and closed his eyes, a guttering moan of sorrow trembling through his jaws.

The fairy sighed, giving him a reassuring pat on the snout; she looked up to see the mother mouse stand up with her child in her arms, carrying her back into the burrow, with the old shrew and other two furlings following closely behind. The young dragon watched with an almost-pleading sadness as the last of them disappeared into the shadow of the burrow, up until the door closed shut behind them.

Then, and only then, did he finally turn to leave. His long tail pushed and snapped many of the dead cornstalks over as he turned himself around, the withered plants falling to the dead ground with heavy thuds.

Zoe fluttered to the ground and simply stood there, watching with a sad expression as the young Elder Dragon made his way back the way he came, the last of his spine-covered tail slowly disappearing into the darkness of the field. She waited as the footfalls grew too soft for her pointed ears to pick up, and once she decided he was far enough way...

...she promptly summoned her wand in a flash of magic and held it up like a sword, turning toward the house with a very unhappy glare.

It was time to start what she came here for.

And a mere family of mice would prove to be much easier to get rid of than an entire colony would have; one house, one group of about five or six, and no visible or magically-detectable defenses from Fae magic that she could see. Frankly, she felt it was *too* easy: all it would take was a powerful fire spell to erase it all in a single blaze, leaving no trace that rodentkin had ever

gotten this close to Feywild. Spyro would get the Lee of the Stone back, the Council would never have to know rodentkin were ever here, and she could continue her duty for Spyro in peace. Literally *everybody* wins.

…well…everybody but the mice themselves…a small family of mice, just trying to live their lives, not even aware of the trouble they were causing.

She gave a long, weary groan, running her free hand down her face in exasperation as the unwelcome stings of empathy and pity made themselves known, preventing her from raising her wand against the house…*one spell*…it would only take ***one spell*** and that would be that. No fuss whatsoever.

But *of course*, it *couldn't* be that simple after all, could it?

And besides, if Spyro were to find out they were killed, especially that mother mouse…who was just trying to raise and protect her children…she doubted he would take it well.

She gave one final, groaning sigh as she de-materialized her wand in a cloud of sparkling pixie dust, returning it to her magic. Fine…she'd *play it nice*. As ***easy*** as it would be to simply wipe them out, she would *move the little loving mousey family* to a safe place of sunshine, rainbows, and all the cheese they could eat. One of these days, she had to get around to looking for a means of removing that pesky little parasite called compassion from herself.

Though if she had been watching her step rather than berating her own sense of morality, she would've noticed the long string pulled taut in front of her path before she tripped it.

SNAP!

"WAAAHH!"

There was a loud whip-like crack as the rope snapped against her ankle, and before she could so much as blink the ground around her exploded in a flurry of leaves, dirt, and string. She shrieked in alarm as her entire body

was enveloped in a net of thick yarn and hoisted high into the air with a whipping motion, the bent cornstalk snapping straight and yanking the trap tight around its victim, like a spider's web catching a fly. Acting on instinct, she immediately tried to summon her magic and teleport out of the net; this resulted in a painful, almost electrical shock as her magic was forcefully dispelled, causing her to yelp in pain.

These were anti-fae strings, made with special enchanted materials with the intention of stopping fairies from using magic. A trap made deliberately for her.

And judging from the loud ringing of the bell tied to the string that held the net, she knew it was only a matter of time before the spider answered the tugging of the threads. Or in this case, when the mouse came looking for the cheese. Unable to do much else but wiggle, the strung-up fairy could only stare blankly ahead and mutter her mind under her breath.

"Oh, *Sard* Me."

Chapter 7: Trappings of the Shrew

Chapter Text

Teresa Brisby finished bringing the last of the seeds out of storage, dumping the large sack of coconut-sized corn seeds onto the pile. She gave a tired sigh afterwards, rubbing the soreness from her arms; all of winter months spent underground always took their toll on a working mouse's muscles, turning them soft from lack of use for such a long period of time. It would be a few weeks before she and the rest of her family would regain their usual strength, and farming could properly begin.

Currently twelve years of age, Teresa had only been about three when her father moved his family away from Rosebush City and built their little home here, at the Lee of the Stone; only a few weeks after Martin was born. She barely remembered anything of the capital city, though; her life was that of a field mouse, through and through. And it was a good life, overall: peaceful most of the time, with plenty of food on the table, a strong roof over their heads, and a loving family.

But she'd be lying if she said it wasn't a little…*empty*.

When her father said they were going to get away from it all, he hadn't been joking: some days, the Lee of the Stone felt like a tiny island separated from the rest of Nimh by a sea of grass and trees. The closest place where other mice lived was Dapplewood, and that was at *least* a three-day trip by foot. She and her siblings had a few friends there, but they only saw them once every few months, whenever they visited to buy supplies, tools, and other things needed for the farm, as well as sell some of their produce in the market.

The only non-family member they ever saw on a regular basis was her mother's adoptive 'aunt', Auntie Shrew, but she was a mean-tempered, no-nonsense old rodent with absolutely no sense of humor and barely any patience for the antics of children; she and Martin constantly got on each other's nerves, getting into shouting fights all the time. There was also Mr.

Ages, an old friend of her father back in the day, but he lived almost half a day's travel from the stone, in one of the old human ruins. He was also a complete and utter recluse that didn't like visitors at all, only interacting with others when he absolutely had to. The only reason he even gave them any time of the day was because they were related to his friend.

It other words, it was a rather dull life for the children; no friends to play with or talk to outside of each other, and nowhere to go that didn't require their parents to watch them…

…or their *mother* to watch them, as it was now.

The furling paused and closed her eyes, bracing herself as the wave of sadness passed over her, triggered by the knowledge that she was never going to see her father again. The memory of that horrible night when they received the news was still clear as day, and the wound it made still open in all their hearts. None more-so than her mother, who now carried the burden of taking care of her family all by herself, having assumed the role of family leader after his passing.

A difficult job for her, as she was not nearly as experienced in the matters of providing for a family as her husband had been. She had always been the one to take care of the children while he brought home the cheese, so to speak. Which now left her struggling to adapt to this more-demanding life, made all the more difficult by the emotional pain of the loss (and the fear of the now-uncertain future), constantly hanging overhead like a dark cloud.

It was heart-breaking to watch; their poor mother, carrying the weight of it all on top of the gaping hole in her heart, trying her hardest to protect her children from a world that was simply waiting for her to make a mistake.

She couldn't stay like this forever. None of them could; lost and weary of the life and love they would never have again.

Things needed to change, and soon. For all their sake.

Teresa pushed these thoughts down, taking a deep breath; that could wait. There was work to be finished for the day, and now they had to make every

moment count if they hoped to harvest before winter. But before that, she needed to check on her siblings to make sure they were doing alright…or doing work at all. She gave a flat look of annoyance at that thought: Martin was *supposed* to be collecting firewood, but given his absence around the face-cord stack, it was likely he had slipped away to take a nap, as he often did when no one was-

"-if you would just give me a *second* to explain! I've got no interest in you or your mouse friends!"

The young mouse's ears perked up at the unfamiliar shout; she didn't recognize that voice. Who was that?

"Think you can come sneaking about, destroying our crops, and terrorizing our furlings? Now that there's no one around to stop you?"

That voice she did recognize. It was Auntie Shrew's, and she sounded *very* unhappy, more so than usual. Who was she talking to? She barely had time to ponder the question before it was answered in what was, perhaps, the most peculiar sight she had ever seen:

Strung up like a fresh roast ready for the oven and being dragged through the dirt by her cantankerous aunt, was an Honest-to-Frith Fairy: a sight the furling had honestly never expected to ever see outside of bedtime storybooks and dreams. She looked just how her father use to describe them in his tales of his past; like a furless, clear-skinned, slim-bodied woman with pointy ears, large butterfly-like wings, and other insect body-parts; she was even wearing a pretty yellow-and-orange dress made from flower petals to complete the image. She was much bigger than Teresa had pictured them from said stories, though: easily as large as Justin, her father's old rat friend from Rosebush City, by no means the tiny fluttering pixie of fairy-tales.

She was also outright *snarling* like an angry weasel, baring teeth that were far too sharp and cat-like to be in the mouth of such a human-like creature, though given her current situation she could hardly be blamed for it.

Her entire body was bound in several yards of Auntie's Shrew's home-woven 'No-Fae String', from her ankles to her shoulders, binding her legs together while pinning her arms to her sides and her wings to her back, leaving the Fae unable to do much else but wiggle like a stuck caterpillar as she was dragged across the ground by the shrew, who had the ugliest look of contempt Teresa had even seen (and contempt was her natural state of emotion, so that was saying something). The shrew pulled her captive along by the string around the heels, dragging her out from the depths of the cornfield and towards the old, almost-dead bush that stood at the edge of the farm; a bush they used to hang items up off the ground. A web of similar strings hung from its bare, skeletal branches, normally used to string up baskets of food off the ground to keep the bugs from getting them, though today they were about to used for something very different.

And beside it all was a trembling Cynthia, who was all but clinging to Auntie Shrew, holding onto her aunt's scarf with her good hand as if her life depended on it, forcing the older rodentkin to almost dance her steps around the frightened furling.

It took a moment for Teresa to find her voice again, so taken aback by the unexpectedness of the situation.

"…A-Auntie Shrew, what's going on?" she finally asked as she caught up to them near the base of the bush, hesitantly approaching the commotion with cautious steps.

"Ah, Teresa! Perfect timing!" Auntie Shrew said as she promptly let go of her captive, allowing the fairy's legs to fall to the ground. "I found this ruffian caught up in one of my traps." She explained as she guided Cynthia from her side to the older furling. She then turned back to her captive with another ugly glare. "It appears s*he's* the one responsible for hurting dear Cynthia, conjuring images of giant monsters to scare the wits out of the poor dear!"

"If you call simply stumbling across each other 'to scare the wits out of someone’." The fairy growled as she squirmed against her bonds, to no avail.

"Hmph! You're *not* fooling *me* with your forked-tongued lies!" The elderly rodentkin harrumphed, fetching one of the long strings hanging down from the bush. "I know *all* about you Fae and your *trickster* ways!"

"*Clearly*." Said Fae muttered as the old rodent tied the hanging rope to the one binding her ankles.

"Silver-tongued devils, the lot of you!" She continued on her tirade as she pulled hard on the other end of it; the fairy gave a light yelp of surprise as she was suddenly hoisted up into the air by her feet like the load of a pulley, hanging upside down like a cocooned caterpillar. Numerous items she had in her skirt-pockets fell out with a clatter, scattering lightly across the ground around her. "Your kind thinks, just because you have magical power over the world, that you can just torment and harass the 'lesser mortals' however you please, right?"

"*Well*…" The fairy began with a snide voice.

"*Wrrrrong*!" Auntie Shrew interrupted, tying the string off around an upturned root, giving it an extra yank for good measure. "*You*, in particular, have a *lot* of nerve: poisoning the crops and terrorizing the furlings of a young, recently-widowed mother. Have you no shame in yourself?"

That actually made the winged girl blanch a bit, her apathetic face actually twisting in an almost comical look of realization. "I…well, *dang*. When you put it *that* way…I *am* a bit of a twat, aren't I?" She asked.

Teresa made a face at that remark, too late to cover her little sister's ears but instinctively placing her paws over them anyway; she didn't know what the word meant, but she knew a swear word when she heard one. Hardly the kind of language she expected a graceful, dainty fairy like the ones in the stories to say.

She also hoped Martin hadn't been nearby when she said that, otherwise she'd predict there would be many mouthfuls of soap coming his way in the future.

Auntie Shrew continued rattling on without missing a beat, grabbing a second string, and looping it around the fairy's head. "The sooner you self-serving ruffians learn to treat your fellow Soul Bearers with respect, the better!"

"Look, for the *last sarding time*, I was *just passing through* and w-*I* spooked her by accident! I didn't mean for anyone to get hurt!" The fairy said in a truly exasperated voice, sounding completely and utterly done with the situation she had found herself in. "It would save us *both* a lot of trouble if you would just let me-MMPPHHH!"

Whatever she was about to say was abruptly cut off as the string was pulled around her head in a way that not only pulled her up into a horizontal position, but also slip directly through her open mouth like a horse's bridle, effectively gagging her on the spot.

"That's enough out of you!" The shrew snapped, tying the string off near the first, effectively stringing her up like a slab of meat for all the predators of the wild to snack upon. "A few days out here ought to give you time to rethink your lot in life!"

"D-Don't you think that's a bit harsh, Auntie?" Teresa asked, even as Cynthia timidly clung to her dress in fear. "She *did* say it was an accident."

The older rodentkin gave her a look of disapproval. "Teresa, dear, *do* remember everything I taught you about the Fae people." She scolded her, taking on her 'teaching stance' as she often did when lecturing them. "They live for the trickery of Rodentkin; *everything* that comes out of their mouths is in the name of deceiving us into their vile tricks, so they may swoop in and make off with our livelihoods and even our children when we least expect it! Why, she would go as far as to trick us into believing she was *King Nicodemus himself* if it meant getting us to lower our guards!"

Teresa pretended to be listening to her aunt's word with rapt attention, but out of the corner of her eye she could see the bound fairy had stopped struggling to watch the shrew with a completely dumbfounded look, as if she herself couldn't believe the sheer nonsense she was hearing.

And to be honest, the young mouse found herself equally doubtful, although she was wise enough not to show it.

But no more objections could be made, as she found her aunt pulling her over by the wrist, away from Cynthia towards the bound fairy.

"Now, I want you and your brother to keep an eye on this hooligan and make sure she doesn't get away, until I can get help!" She instructed her firmly as she handed her the string that held the trap together; Teresa took it hesitantly, unsure of the whole situation. The old rodentkin picked up her walking stick and promptly poked the fairy in the side of the head with it. "And as for *you*, you *fluttering floozy*!" She snapped, resulting in an insulted *mmph!* of anger. "*I* wouldn't try anything. I shall…return!"

And with that, she promptly hobbled off in a huff, muttering under her breath as she began the long trip to Mr. Age's house, leaving the two children to watch over their 'captive'.

Zoe waited until the shrew disappeared into the woods before she gave a truly exasperated sigh and slumped against her bonds, unable to do much more than hang limply in the air. There were many ways she had planned to spend the first day she and Spyro returned to Nimh, and believe it or not, *this* was *not* one of them.

'You just had *to try the nice route, didn't you?'* She mentally berated herself in agitation, both from her own mistake of getting caught and from the anti-fae ropes that were starting to irritate her skin. *'Couldn't have just blown the farm off the face of the map and be done with it when you had the chance, could you?! You just had to go and be Miss Goody Two Shoes for once?! Now look at you: captured by an old hag and a bunch of furlings! Next time Mr. Shoulder Angel decides to open his big mouth, he's going on the spit!'*

She gave a weary groan, utterly done with the situation but unable to do anything to get out of it. Spyro was *never* going to let her live it down when he came back for her, and the Hollow forbid Oberon and the council ever find out about this little screw-up.

She was pulled out of her internal rant when another furling emerged from the nearby grass: the grey boy mouse with the blue T-shirt. And judging from both his timing and the grumpy look on his face, he had been waiting until the shrew left until he revealed himself. A smart move on his part, Zoe thought.

"That bossy bullfrog…" the boy furling grumbled, slapping his palm with his stick as if it was a weapon. "Who does she think she is? Ordering us around like she's Mom…"

"Martin!" The girl furling, 'Teresa', hissed at her brother.

Zoe turned her attention away from the incoming sibling conflict to try her luck escaping. The shrew had made a mistake stringing the gag in her mouth; while it may have had the ability to cancel out fay magic, her teeth were still as sharp and deadly as ever. She bit down into the rope, ignoring the burning sting of salt in her mouth, and began working her jaws back and forth in a sawing motion. She could feel the tiny threads snap one by one against the sharp edges of her fangs.

If she could keep this up without being caught for just a few seconds longer…

A sudden weight pulled on her from the side, causing her to bob mid-air and the strings to dig into her arms and legs. She gave a muffled yelp of pain before straining her neck over to see what caused it; out of the corner of her eye, she saw the boy furling, 'Martin', climbing up one of the strings, moving with a surprising amount of agility than she would've thought a creature of his girth could.

"Martin, what are you doing?!" Teresa asked in a fretful tone.

"I'm untying her, what does it look like?" He stated as if it was the most obvious thing, shimmying up until he plopped himself on Zoe's back as if riding a horse; despite being less than half her size, she could still feel the additional weight pull on her bonds. His soft fur also tickled her bare arms, and it took a good deal of willpower to keep from reacting.

Teresa looked outright alarmed at the idea. "B-But you heard what Auntie Shrew said!" She objected, still holding onto the string she had been handed. "If we let her go-!"

"Since when does anything that loud-mouth says actually comes true?" Martin scoffed dismissively as he fiddled with the binding around the fairy's head. "Besides, Dad always said the fairies were his friends; even had adventures with some before he met Mom! I'll believe him over that old shrew any day."

That brought a look of conflict to the female furling's face. "Well, y-yeah. But…" She stammered, now unsure.

Whatever further objections she could've made were rendered moot; whether the boy furling had finished untying the string around the fairy's mouth or said fairy's teeth had finally finished biting through it, the gag around her head snapped loose. Zoe barely had time to get a gasp of fresh air before she fell from her suspended trap, landing face-first on the ground with an audible 'THUMP!'. Cynthia gave an audible squeak of fear before she scampered behind her sister's skirts, while the older furling herself gave a small chirp of surprise at the sudden fall.

Zoe, meanwhile, lifted her face out of the dirt and promptly spat the loose strands of string out of her mouth. "Thank you *very* much! You have *no idea* how much this stuff *burns*."

"She's talking!" Cynthia squeaked, only vaguely aware that she wasn't supposed to listen to fairies speak.

The brown-haired fairy only gave the furling an unamused look before she wriggled over onto her back; with a lift and a heave with her legs, she managed to flip herself up into a sitting position, folding her bound legs against themselves to keep herself steady. Then, with an impressive amount of bodily control, she managed to heave herself forward and push herself up onto her feet; at that point, it was merely an act of standing up without falling over and she was upright again. The furlings all stared up in awe at how tall she was; at least the same height as the average rat, standing more than twice their own height.

"Yes, yes, it is I: The Great and Terrible Zoe, here to steal all your left socks, turn your grannies into slugs, and all that other evil fairy stuff. You have *that* for an aunt, you know the drill." She stated flatly, wobbling back and forth in place like a sack full of water. The furlings gathered around her, their expressions now those of curiosity rather than fear. "Now that we've established that, can you untie me now? As I said, these strings burn something fierce."

"What are you doing here?" Teresa asked as she walked around her, hesitantly unwinding her bonds yet still genuinely curious.

"You know, I'm actually here to ask you guys the exact same thing." Zoe told her, turning her body in place to follow her gaze. This ended up being a mistake, though; she barely had time to realize this action had thrown off her already-weakened balance when she felt herself begin to tilt forward.

"Legs! *Legs*! *LEEEEEEEGS*!" She cried, but it was too late.

Cynthia, who was following her sister with the end of the string in her good hand, barely had time to drop said string and scamper out of Zoe's shadow before the fairy keeled over like a falling tree and once again found herself becoming personally (and painfully) acquainted with the earth.

"Ow…" She grumbled in the dirt; something definitely broke that time.

She felt the pitter-patter of paws in front of her, and she pulled her face up out of the dirt to see Cynthia leaning in to examine her, her large, outright comically-adorable eyes wide with a mix of childlike wonder and caution.

"Oh, the poor bumble-bee lady fell down." She cooed in a pitiful tone, as if trying to make her feel better.

Zoe blanched, taken quite aback by that statement, before promptly rolling over onto her side.

"I-wha-…*where* in the Hollow did you get *Bumble-Bee* from?" she asked in an exasperatedly-incredulous manner, pushing herself up into a sitting position again; it was by no means the worst thing she had been called, not

by a long shot, but she was still dumbfounded by it. "A Butterfly, maybe, but why a *Bumble-Bee*?"

The blonde furling pointed to Zoe's abdomen-tail and, with all the tactfulness a three-year-old could possibly have, matter-of-factly said: "You have a bumble bee butt."

Teresa had to clap her hands over her mouth to stop the squeak of laughter from escaping her lips, failing to suppress the giggles from escaping. Martin didn't even bother to try hiding it, outright rolling onto his back with his arms around his stomach, openly guffawing. Cynthia was completely unaware as to why her siblings were laughing, but laughter is nothing if not contagious for children, and soon she was giggling as well, even if she didn't truly know why.

Zoe watched the three giggling away without a care in the world, their smiles pure and untainted by the burdens of the world, and she felt that pesky bite of ol' Mr. Conscience gnaw at her insides…until a fourth voice brushed against the tips of her ears; one that she was far more familiar with. It was so deliberately distant and quiet, she almost missed it completely, but her fairy ears were just sharp enough to pick up noises that mouse ears evidently could not…and the guttural rattle of saurian vocalizations was undeniable.

Keeping an unamused expression on her face, she glanced in the direction of the noise; this made it look like she was merely rolling her eyes at the laughing children, so as to avoid drawing their attention to where Spyro was hiding.

And sure enough, there he was.

In the cornfield behind the furlings, concealed within the shadows, she spotted him; the dim light barely reflected off his scales, casting a dim outline of his large form in the shade. If that wasn't enough, the star-like glow of his eyes was shining forth in the dark, and within those eyes, even from all the way over here, she could see it: that unmistakable glint of amusement, as well as the gleaming reflection of his teeth, his jaws open

and his lips curled up as the quiet guttural laughter bubbled up from his throat.

The fairy fought the urge to snarl in disbelief as well as exasperation; had he been there the entire time?! Just sitting back and watching her be dragged around like a sack of dead meat, letting these cheese-nibbling rascals use her as a glorified punching bag?! She narrowed her eyes dangerously at him, hoping he could see her displeasure from this distance; it sure was easy to laugh at one's humiliation when *you* weren't the one going through it, wasn't it?!

The Bond she shared with him be damned; once she got out of this mess, she was going to turn his tail into a dragon-scale purse! It would go nicely with the boots she made out of the rest of him!

"So…" Teresa started, prompting the scowling fairy to drop her frown and turn her attention back to the mice. "If you aren't here to 'curse our farm' or that kinda stuff, then why *are* you here?"

"As I said before, that's the very question *I* came to ask *you*." Zoe told her. "You mice are a few days afar from Dapplewood, don't you think?"

"What do you mean? We *live* here." Martin answered rather firmly, taking a bit of a defensive tone towards her question. "This is *our* home."

"And *your* home is on *our* land." She fired right back, unfazed by his remark. "This is Feywild: *Fae Territory,* that you've built your farm on, and we don't like *trespassers*." She motioned to the stone towering over them with a nod of the head. "The Lee of the Stone, in particular, is also a very important place to us fairies: a place we gave to a very close friend of ours."

After saying this, she took the moment to observe their reactions.

Martin remained stubbornly firm on his stance, scowling at her like she was the one in the wrong here. Teresa, on the other hand, seemed to recognize the severity of the situation, if the look of concerned fear coming over her face was anything to judge by.

Zoe was impressed at that; it appears that at least one of them was smarter than the rustic surroundings would lead others to believe. That meant that at least one of their parents had the smarts to school their children at home, far away from any towns and the schools they had. A luxury not a lot of Mice Rodentkin could afford, as higher education was usually something only the Rats or richer families of lesser rodentkin were granted access to through privilege.

And Cynthia was…wait, where was the-?

That's when she saw her, and the fairy had to bite down on her own tongue to keep from outright screaming.

While they had been talking, the youngest mouse had wandered over to where all of Zoe's belongings had fallen across the ground and was now going through them like the child she was, fascinated by all the shiny new toys to play with. And the one she decided to play with was none other than the Speaking Crystal that she had just been talking to Oberon with! And she was *rubbing her good paw across the surface!* If she touched it two more times like that, the spell would activate, and she would get a personal introduction to the King of Feywild!

Then there would be no chance for negotiation at that point.

Zoe wanted to shout at her not to touch it, but she realized doing so would only make things worse; not only was the tension between them already dangerously tense at this point, but revealing she had direct connections to the king of all fairy kind would probably only encourage them to use it. The very innocence of childhood that was her saving grace was now turned against her in the most ironic sense.

Truly a double-edged sword.

"Well, we were here first!" Martin snapped at her, drawing her attention back to the conversation. "And we've never seen this 'special friend' of yours."

Zoe turned back to the two older mice, though she kept the nerve-wracking sight of Cynthia playing with the crystal in her peripheral vision. "That's because said friend and I have been away for a while, and only just got back this morning." She explained, already aware of how contrived that sounded.

"How do we know you're not lying?" Martin continued, waving his little stick at her face like a sword.

Zoe cocked an eyebrow at the rather silly display of childish bravado. "Let me ask you this, then: how long have you mice lived here?"

Martin opened his mouth to say something, but Teresa beat him to it. "About nine years." She explained, looking a little skeptical herself but still playing the role of peace-keeper. "Dad moved us here a few weeks after Martin was born."

'Figures…' The fairy thought to herself; literally only *one year* after she and Spyro had left for the Dragon Realms…and roughly the time they were supposed to come back home to Nimh, were it not for the greenskin idiot with the eggshell ego dragging them into that stupid quest to save said realms.

"And we've been gone for ten, so you just missed us." She told them with a sigh, already internally cringing from how much of a lie it sounded like; even if it was true, it sounded way too convenient to be believable. And they apparently thought so too, if their now-doubtful faces were anything to go by. Teresa gave her own sigh and glanced toward her brother expectantly, who only nodded in response.

"Okay…maybe Auntie Shrew was right this time." He admitted, picking up the string that he had untied Zoe from, earning a groan of defeat from the fairy. "Guess fairies can't be trusted after all."

Zoe gave the mouse boy a flat, unamused glance, as if she was about to say something, until a sudden movement behind them caught her eye.

The movement of a very large creature that finally decided to act.

Martin had barely taken a step towards her before she spoke again, a bright gleam of pride and smugness in her eyes. "Then perhaps you'll believe *his* word instead."

The furling boy paused in confusion, turning to look at his equally confused sister, when a deep, draconian growl thundered through their bones like the rumble of an earthquake, impacting them with all the subtlety of a thunderclap. They didn't have the time to comprehend their own shocked fear before the cornstalks behind them began to sway and crack, the tall plants being shoved aside as a massive saurian form pushed its way through. Large wings shoved the wall apart as their owner stepped out from his hiding place, his form and power looming over the four creatures with all the presence of a *dormant volcano*, just waiting to erupt.

Cynthia stared up in overwhelming horror as the monster she had just encountered made its presence known.

Whatever bravery Martin had been flaunting quickly crumbled away as he realized the sheer size and form of the beast before them.

And in later years, Teresa would look back on this moment and question what kind of sick-humored deity would answer her prayer for change like *this*.

For nothing, not even all the imagination her father had given them with his stories and teaching, and not even the surprise of seeing a real-life fairy in the flesh, could've prepared any of them for the moment they would first come face to face with a *Dragon*.

For a minute that felt like an eternity, none of the mice *dared* to move. Not a single word was spoken, and not even a single squeak was made, for they were all but frozen where they stood out of sheer survival instinct.

For all the desire Teresa had to *scream* in terror, or to turn tail and flee as if the Great Owl himself was after her, she *couldn't*. It was as if her body itself had been turned to stone, her limbs outright refusing to obey her desire to

escape out of sheer instinct of survival, leaving her unable to do anything but tremble and gape in absolute fear at the sight before them.

It was if her body was *keeping* her from doing anything that could draw the attention of one of, if not *the* most dangerous beast to ever roam the realms.

A *Dragon*. And not the great Beast-Cat of the name given to it by mice, but an Honest-to-Frith ***Dragon***! One of the great winged, fire-breathing reptiles of the far north, not just here on Nimh, but on *their* farm! And just as massive and terrifying as the legends made them out to be. The color of its scales made it look even more-so like a creature of legend: a sharp royal purple in color, making it stand out almost blindingly against the winter-dried brown of the cornfield it was currently standing in, its back half still hidden within the wall of stalks and its fiery-orange wings folded against its sides.

But the most demanding feature of the beast was definitely its eyes...its fierce, draconian eyes that burned with the fire that could destroy entire kingdoms.

Her body may have been frozen on the spot, her tiny heart pounding furiously in her chest, but her terrified mind was racing with thousands of questions at once: What was it doing here? Was *this* the special friend that the fairy had been talking about? She had been telling the truth?! And if so, then where in the world had this thing been for the past ten years?! It couldn't have been here; if a *dragon* had been living at the Stone before they had moved here, surely they would've seen it by now!

Or, more likely, it would've burned them to ash by now.

Whatever ancient, blood-rooted instinct was keeping her in place prevented her from taking her eyes off the sight of the creature towering over them, but she could just make out her siblings in the corner of her eyes.

Like she was, Martin was all but rooted in place out of pure mousey terror, eyes almost comically-wide and jaw quivering with the emotion; any and all of his previous bravado had vanished from his shaking form, the stick he had been using as a make-believe weapon having fallen out of his shaking

paws. While she could hardly blame him for feeling such a way, she also felt that small, almost instinctual pinch of exasperation nip through her fear; Martin liked to think of himself as a fearless mouse like their father had been, but it was when confronted with any form of danger that the true strength of his 'courage', or lack thereof, revealed itself. This was the incident with the spider all over again…

Cynthia, on the other hand, had a completely different reaction.

Rather than freeze on the spot with fear as the other two had done, her eyes widened in horrified recognition before she gave a truly frightened cry and bolted, still clutching the Speaking Crystal to her chest while running straight for her sister. It was then, and only then, did the spell over the oldest furling finally break, letting her open her arms to catch the ball of fluff that all but barreled into her, wrapping her arms protectively around the wailing toddler as she clung to her dress as if her life depended on it, large round tears dripping down her sandy-blonde cheeks.

It was then that a bolt of realization struck: purple scales…this was the 'giant purple monster' that she had been going on about before! The one that caused that scratch on her arm!

It *hadn't* been a 'fairy's dastardly magic trick' after all.

Then the silence was once again broken, this time by the fairy in question.

"Well, it's *about time* you decided to get off your scaly ass." Zoe suddenly said with annoyance, as if she was merely snapping at an annoying sibling rather than the mightiest of all legendary creatures, no fear in her voice whatsoever. "How long did it take for you to even realize I was missing?"

The dragon's face was just as saurian as the rest of its body, which meant it couldn’t make facial expressions as mammals could. But its eyes were surprisingly expressive, showing the deadpan annoyance it felt towards its evident companion.

The cornstalks cracked as it pushed forward, the rest of its massive form sliding forth like a great serpent. The ground shook softly under its

footfalls, but not nearly as much as one would expect an animal of that size; it was outright cat-like, the way it quietly approached the group, the last of its very long tail slipping out from the shadows behind it. Teresa held Cynthia close as she back-pedaled several steps, breath hitching in her throat as she kept their distance, while Martin outright fell backwards into Zoe's lap, earning an 'oof' of displeasure from the fairy in question.

Then something completely unexpected happened, even for an unbelievable situation like this. Something that made Teresa's ears perk up in surprise:

The giant, terrifying, purple-scale dragon *spoke*.

"The moment I heard the trap ring." It stated bluntly, sounding completely unconcerned for the fairy's well-being.

Zoe bristled with indignation. "You mean you've just been sitting around, watching that mangy bag of swamp-gas drag me around like a sack of meat this entire time?!" She shrieked, scaring poor Martin off her lap as if it had suddenly burst into flame; the boy furling decided the safest place to hide was behind his sisters, leaving all three furlings huddled into a small trembling pile of fur.

The dragon appeared unmoved by the fairy's outburst, eyes narrowing as he moved to the side, his neck, body, and tail following the head in a serpentine fashion. ***"*****You're** ***the one who let your guard down."*** He growled firmly, baring his all-too deadly teeth just a bit. ***"You have no one to blame but yourself for your humiliation."***

There were two things about the dragon's voice that caught Teresa's attention.

First off: the jaws and lips didn't move when he spoke. His voice (which was obviously male, revealing that he was a boy dragon) ‘felt’ like it was coming from his throat and out from within his currently-closed jaws, but his mouth didn't move, and his lips didn't form the shapes needed to pronounce the words. Said lips were more like those of a lizard, so he probably couldn't even if he tried, yet the words seemed to be coming from it clear as day, even when it was shut.

Magic, perhaps? Or something special for dragons? That was her best guess.

And the second was not as unnatural, but it caught her attention even more so than the fact he could speak to begin with: the voice itself. It was a voice that thrummed with the deep rumble of an earthquake. It was a voice that crackled with the growl of a blazing forest fire. It was a voice that channeled the very spirit of the elements into an audible form, as if he was speaking with the voice of the world itself.

It was the voice…of a *child*.

Even as it rumbled deep and powerful, there was no mistaking the youthful quality of it. He was *very* well spoken for a child, speaking with a vocabulary that, even with all her father's schooling, she would've found difficult to use. But she could hear it: the higher-pitched 'chime' of a creature who was just shy of his teen years, interwoven amongst all the draconian qualities.

And when she looked across the creature's body, her mind no longer completely consumed by fear, she could see it all across his intimidating form…a form that was starting to look a bit less intimidating which each second. It would've been hard for anyone to spot in the midst of blind panic, but all the signs were there: a body that was slimmer around the neck and torso, limbs that looked a bit too long for their width, eyes that were a touch large for the head.

These were qualities of a creature that was just starting to grow into its adult form: a teenager, just like she was going to become in a year's time.

This dragon…this mighty, ferocious beast of legend, nearly as large as the Beast-Cat of the same name...he was a *child*.

No older than they were.

"Alright, fine! Whatever!" Zoe finally submitted. "Just get me out of this mess already, would you?"

Spyro promptly gave a deep snort of defiance, twin jets of smoke shooting out from his nostrils. As if he was going to waste his time dealing with her nonsense.

He hadn't even gotten out of the cornfield when he had heard Zoe scream, followed by the ringing chime of a bell. He had been so distracted by the Tight Emptiness that he didn't even notice that she wasn't following him. However, hearing her cry snapped him to full alert, his turmoil quickly shifting to protective instinct as he made his way back to her as quickly as he could without revealing himself…just in time to see her being found and prodded at by the old shrew that had accompanied the warm-eyed mouse in healing the furling. From there he had watched the shrew pull his fairy down, bound her up in string, and drag her out to the center of the farm, squawking non-stop like an angry buzzard the entire time.

It had been as confusing as it was amusing, so much so that he couldn't bring himself to stop it: it had been the most entertaining show he had watched in years, and he wasn't inclined to end it now.

Especially considering why she had gotten herself into this mess in the first place: she was trying to make the mice leave the Lee of the Stone so he could get it back.

This was *not* what he wanted. The fact that he had not already done so himself was a clear enough sign that he didn't want this, and yet she openly ignored him and tried to act of her own accord, be it doing something that she believed he wanted or not. If he had wanted to take the stone back, then he was *more* than capable of doing so himself.

And he nearly had in his brief moment of rage: one breath would've been enough to completely erase them and everything they had built off the face of the earth. Return everything back to the way it was before he left. To the way he remembered it.

But…as much as he longed to return to what was his, he chose not to.

After what he saw…that *warmth* in the mother’s mouse's eyes…he couldn't bring himself to destroy everything she had made for her family, just so he

could get his old sunning spot back.

This was their home now…*her* home now. And was not going to interfere with it any more than he already had.

With another smoke-filled huff of a breath, he promptly shifted his weight back onto his hind legs and laid himself down on the ground, tucking his legs and folding his wings into a resting position against his sides, ending it all by curling his tail around into a protective half-circle behind him.

Zoe gave an outright pained groan and rolled her head back in exasperation, almost falling backwards. "You *cannot* be serious right now." She outright whined.

It was completely serious. She had no one to blame for her current predicament but herself, and he was in no rush to relieve her of the consequences of her actions.

If she wanted to get out, she could do so herself.

Another smokey snort was all he gave in response. Instead, he simply laid his head on the ground and stared out over the stone's open glade and to the river at the edge of it: one of the last parts that hadn't been turned into a farming field. His powerful muscles went slack across his body as he slowly relaxed into a comfortable slump, a small flicker of warmth shining from deep within his half-lidded eyes, as everything fell into a comfortable silence. The only sounds to be heard were his rumbling breath, the soft spring breeze rustling through the leaves, and the distant calls of songbirds.

His eyes slowly drooped shut as the warm glow of memories from the past began to flow through his mind's eye, images of happier times filling him with what he could only describe as a 'longing warmth'.

It wasn't the same as he remembered it, and he knew that it would never be so again…but now, with this, he could have a little of it back.

If only for a brief moment.

Then, just as he was feeling the weight of sleep slowly creep into his mind, the silence was broken by the most unexpected of voices:

"Y-You're…you're not going to eat us."

He had been keeping them in his peripheral vision as he had been dealing with his obnoxious Familiar: the three tiny balls of fluff that had made his former Stone their home. When he looked at them last, their bodies had been frozen out of sheer survival instinct, watching him with *truly* fearful eyes. A wise move on their part, honestly; they were far too small to be worth the calories it would take for a beast his size to chase and catch them, so keeping perfectly still and not doing anything to provoke ire in any way was the best chance a mortal had to survive an encounter with a dragon.

He hadn't expected any of them to do anything other than scream and run away, or remain frozen until he decided to leave (before the old shrew got back with help)…and what she said…

Shifting his head against the ground, he leaned it to the side and opened his left eye to look at them, and it took him a genuine amount of effort not to react with surprise.

The Fear. The complete, overwhelming, *primordial* ***Fear***.

It was *gone*.

Gone? Why? Yes, the caution was there, obviously: they were all still clearly on edge, their feet shifting with the readiness to scamper away at a moment's notice…but the Fear was nowhere to be seen. Not in their bodies, not in the stances, and not even in their eyes. The trembling terror they originally stood with had disappeared from their stances, which had relaxed into those of cautious curiosity rather than blind terror. Even Cynthia, who had been hurt during their first encounter, had worked up the courage to peek out from hiding her face in her sister's chest and was watching him with timid but curious eyes.

They weren't afraid of him. They were a bit wary, yes, but the *Fear*…the Fear he had grown all too accustomed in seeing in everyone who beheld his

form…*it simply wasn't there.*

They didn't fear him.

But that was *impossible*. It was the very nature of the world itself for all living beings to fear him. To feel the complete primordial terror of the monstrous Jendovahzoor. The Son of Malefor. *The one that was feared and hated by all.* ***Even by his own kind.***

That was how it was, how it always had been, and how it always would be.

So *why*…?

"Why aren't you afraid?"

Teresa blinked in surprise, not at all prepared for his voice to suddenly *change*. What was once a thunderous growl of a living force of nature was now a soft uncertain croon. One could even call it *timid*. Hardly a voice she expected to come out of a *dragon* of all creatures.

"W-What?" she managed to ask, her voice catching out of surprise.

"All creatures fear me." he continued in the same, almost painfully-contrasting voice. "Entire armies have fled from me in complete terror. I've made the strongest warriors tremble like frightened children with a single roar. *Even my own kind* ***calls me devil***." She did not miss how his voice darkened at that last statement, and how the glow of his eyes became what could only be described as a 'hateful' burn.

He then looked back at her, and she blinked again at the look he gave her; a glowing gaze that was equal parts the thunderous glare of a great fiery beast looking down upon the specks of mortal life…

…and the confused stare of an uncertain child confronted with something he didn't understand.

"So why don't you?"

This was another moment in her life Teresa would look back upon with questioning, but it would be a moment she would recall with a warm fondness: the moment the image of the legendary beast of greed, destruction, and death forever faded from the purple dragon before her, and she was able to see him for what he truly was: a fellow child, just like them. One who had been lost and alone for a very long time, if what he said about his own kind was true. One who was looking for the light that once filled their life: a light taken away by the cold clawed hands of an unkind world.

A light that they were looking for as well.

The hole in her heart that once held her father ached just a touch more.

"Is that why you're here?" Teresa asked gently as she set Cynthia down; the blonde furling stood on her own feet, but still held tightly to her sister's skirts for protection. "Did the other dragons make you leave…wherever dragons live?"

There was a moment's silence before Spyro lifted his head off the ground and turned it to look at them directly, eyes filled with confusion of being spoken to at all, let alone in such a gentle voice. Something about that idea made Teresa frown internally, though she didn't show it.

"I've always lived on Nimh." he said simply, clearly unsure of what else to say. "I was born here."

"But you left to visit them, right?" The mouse girl continued. "Just before we moved to the stone?"

The dragon's eyes darkened at that question, the memories of those days passing before them like a shadow of a raincloud.

"…Yes." He growled in his thunderous dragon voice, scratching the ground in front of his paws, his sharp claws leaving long groves in the soil. ***"And they didn't want me, so I came back."***

"Why?" Martin was the one who asked that as he stepped out from behind his sisters, his growing curiosity and adventurous spirit finally winning out over his slowly-fading terror. “Why didn't they want you around?”

Spyro didn't answer at first. Instead, he lifted his right foreleg at the elbow and brought his hand up to his gaze. He stared at it with an unreadable expression, or more accurately he stared at the vibrant purple scales that covered it. The very same scales that represented both his blessing and his damnation.

"Because I'm purple." Was all he said.

That unexpectedly-simple answer took the children aback a bit, each expressing a different level of confusion.

"…What? *That's it*?" the boy furling asked incredulously. "Because you're *purple*?"

"It's a little more complicated than that." Zoe finally broke her own silence to jump to Spyro's defense, despite still being tied down against her will. She clicked her tongue in thought. "How do I explain this to kids…?" She murmured to herself, thinking for a second before speaking again. "Purple dragons, like Spyro, have special powers that make them unique from other dragons. And the last purple dragon they met…didn’t use those powers for good." Her expression twisted into something sour, as if the very words tasted foul in her mouth. "That dragon did many *horrible* things and hurt a *lot* of people. So now everyone's scared that all other purple dragons are evil too."

"They* feared *him." Spyro growled in a dark tone; Zoe didn't need to play the truth down for his sake. He was more than aware of it. ***"He* destroyed the world. *Slaughtered* millions. *This realm has* never *known a greater monster."***

As he spoke, he channeled a small bit of his power into the paw he was observing; like glowing cracks in lava-rock spreading from the pressure of the magma below, long, vein-like streaks of a burning purple energy flowed down his limb and to his fingers, his claws igniting with a burst of magenta

flame. The light reflected in his eyes, mixing a touch of purple with their golden glow.

To the children, it was a wondrous sight that left them in wide-eyed awe; the first time any of them had seen true magic.

But to Spyro, it was only yet another painful reminder of the truth.

The truth of what he was.

He clenched his paw into a fist, snuffing the flames out with a soft hiss of steam, and he lowered both his limb and his gaze to the ground.

"I'm the same kind of dragon he was …so I've been damned a monster as well."

With that final statement, he lowered his limb and turned away from the small, young mice, returning to his position of rest as he laid his head back on the ground, the glow of his eyes dimming to a low, lifeless glimmer.

An almost deathly quiet fell over the Lee of the Stone, broken only by the rushing water of the distant river and the wind blowing through the grass. Even the songbirds in the nearby trees seem to have fallen silent, casting the glade into a morbid silence. The dragon held back the urge to bark a spiteful laugh; no doubt they had been scared into silence by his power…or perhaps even they had taken heed of his word and fled while they had the chance.

He expected the furlings would be fleeing soon as well; the Fear *had* to have returned now. Now that they knew what he truly was.

Any creature that valued their life would not ignore the danger; even hatchlings would not be foolish enough to linger in the presence of such a threat. They would flee for the safety of their home…*for their mother's warmth*…then he could take his string-bound fairy and leave before she or the other adults had the chance to check on the children's frightened claims of the evil dragon lurking in the dark forest. As far as they would know it, the fairy that had caused mischief to their farm escaped a faulty trap, and

they would never be the wiser. And they would never have to be cursed by his presence again.

He closed his eyes, a soft thrumming sigh escaping his lungs as twin streams of smoke from his nostrils.

It was the way it had always been. It was the natural order of the world.

It was-

Soft.

It was so small and sudden that he froze, giving off a soft warble of surprise as his eyes snapped open. Something small, soft, and warm pressing itself against his face, just beneath his left eye. A pleasant sensation so alien to him that his mind locked for a split moment trying to comprehend it.

And when he looked down, what he saw outright destroyed everything he knew about the world.

Teresa, the oldest and smartest of the three, perhaps the only one who could possibly comprehend the true danger of his presence and thus had more reason to be afraid than her siblings, had pressed herself against the side of his face, her arms laid out across it as if she were hugging him. She was much too small to actually wrap them around his head, but she embraced him regardless, gently nuzzling his scaly cheek. Her fur was unbelievably soft, softer than even the finest of Fae hair, and warm in the rays of the sun. The palms of her hands were slightly calloused (which was to be expected from the average farm mouse, he supposed), but still soft and gentle to the touch, though in a different way than their fur was.

She pulled back from her nuzzle to look up at him a saddened expression, her eyes full not of fear, but of...*understanding*.

He didn't even have time to get over the mental shock when a second one joined it: Martin had hesitated at first, perhaps still wary of the creature that had first scared them so badly, or perhaps a young boy's silly pride against showing any kind of emotion that could suggest a perceived weakness. But

after a moment of standing back and looking conflicted, he ultimately came up to Spyro and simply sat down next to him, leaning against the side of the dragon's snout without a word. His fur was a little coarser than his sister's, dirtied from his time doing chores throughout the farm, but was no less warm to the touch. He too shared the look of sad understanding his sister did.

Of someone who knew his pain. Maybe not the exact same kind of pain, but one that was similar none the less: one that came from within rather than a wound.

From the Tight Emptiness.

Spyro could only stare at them, barely moving otherwise. His voice, both physical and telepathic, had been lost in a sea of conflict and confusion. And deep within his chest, which had only known the Tight Emptiness for as long as he could remember, *something* flickered. A soft bloom of something…*warm*. It licked at the inside of his breastbone like the tongue of an open flame, causing an irritating heat to constrict his throat and his lungs to grow heavier with each breath; he found himself instinctively taking a deep one, pushing it against the sensation of weight within him.

*"…**Why don't** you run?"* he finally asked again, his voice quiet and wavering. *"I was the **one who got** you* hurt…drained your *crops…**tried to take** your home."* He felt something sharp and hot prick behind his eyes, and he blinked his secondary eyelids to try to clear it away. *"Why do you welcome me into it?"*

There was another moment of silence, before Teresa looked up at him and answered, her voice as gentle as her touch and her eyes as warm as a hearth's fire.

"Because it's your home too."

For one split second, one brief, sudden moment in eternity, and for the first time in his long draconian life, the Tight Emptiness was gone.

And in its place was just a touch of *warmth*.

"…Come on then, you old flim-flam! I've left the children alone with that trickster!"

Sadly, it was not meant to last. The moment of blissful peace between kindred souls was interrupted by the sound of distant voices, coming from the direction the shrew had hobbled off in. Spyro reluctantly pulled his head away from the two and lifted it to look in said direction, eyes narrowing as a soft growl instinctively rumbled between his jaws; the old rodent had returned, just as she had said she would, and she wasn't alone.

That was it for Zoe, who had been silently watching the exchange with an unreadable expression, and she sat up with a jolt of panic. "Okay, no more games, I'm being serious: we *have* to leave! *Now*!" Her tone made the urgency clear, all traces of previous sarcasm and exasperation gone. "We can't let the adults see you here: they do, and we're both dead!"

Spyro gave an outright-pained croon, wanting nothing more in that moment than to stay. After all these years, he had finally found it: something that made the Tight Emptiness go away completely, here with these mice Rodentkin. He had been searching for so long, not even knowing what he was searching for, and now, when he finally felt that he had found it, he had to leave it behind for those who would take it away.

"W-Wait! You don't have to go!" Martin said, looking almost sad that their newest friend was leaving. "We can explain to Mom! I'm sure she'll be okay if you stay!"

"Martin…" Teresa sighed, shaking her head no. She didn't want to say goodbye either, but she knew better; the grown-ups would be afraid of the dragon, and he could get into a lot of trouble, even danger, if he was seen by them.

Spyro stared at them in silence, the glow of his eyes almost completely gone; he *wished* that was true...he *really*, ***truly*** wished it was...but he knew it wasn't. And as the voices grew closer, it knew it was time for him to go.

There was one last thing to do first, though.

So he gave a long, guttural sigh and slowly got up, taking care not to knock into the furlings that were so close to him; they scampered back as he rose, clearing his path as to not get under his feet. His softly shook his body in an almost dog-like fashion, flexing the blood back into his limbs, before turning his gaze to Cynthia; the only one of the furlings who had yet to approach. She stood frozen on the spot, like a deer caught in the light of a hunter's lantern, the only one still genuinely afraid of the gigantic beast towering over her; given their first encounter ended with her getting wounded, that was fair. She clutched the Speaking Crystal to her chest, as if it was the only thing keeping her safe.

Being as slow and non-threatening as he could make himself out to be, Spyro gave a soft trill as he took a step forward, slowly lowering his head down to her.

Her chocolate-brown eyes widened in fear, and her breath quickened into frightened gasps, but she remained where she stood, even as his snout came no closer than a few inches from her. She could feel the heat of the dragon's breath against her fur, akin to the heat of an open hearth. She hugged the crystal tightly as she trembled like a leaf in the wind, not ready to face the scary giant purple monster again. Teresa and Martin showed looks of concern, unsure of what was going to happen.

But then the monster opened his jaws just enough for his long, snake-like tongue to slide out from between his teeth.

There, clutched in its forked tips, was her doll. Her ears perked up at the sight of it, the fear in her eyes replace with surprised, if uncertain, happiness. One of the arms was missing, looking as if it had been burned off, and it was a bit ruffed up and dirty, but it was otherwise still in one piece.

"I didn't mean to scare you when we first met." Spyro told her softly, in a voice that was so quiet and soft that it sounded like that of a fellow mouse. "I came to give this back to you...will you trade my fairy and crystal for it?"

Cynthia didn't say anything, still very nervous, her eyes darting between his own and the doll in his grasp. She took a hesitant step forward, ready to

jump back on a hair trigger, and slowly reached for her doll with her good arm. Spyro remained motionless and quiet, watching with soft eyes as she took her toy from his tongue's coils. As she did, she let the Speaking Crystal drop to the ground with a soft clink; the dragon could hear Zoe give an audible 'Phew!' of relief, but ignored her as his tongue slid back before sliding out again, scooping the crystal up and bringing it into the safety of his mouth. Cynthia, meanwhile, hugged her doll lovingly, a beaming smile on her face as she cuddled it.

Teresa cleared her throat. "Cynthia, what do we say?"

Cynthia looked up shyly at the Spyro, who pulled his head back to its normal position; her eyes no longer held their original fear of the monster that had 'attacked' her in the woods, though she was still a bit intimidated by him.

"T-Thank you, Mr. Dragon." She muttered softly, hiding behind her favorite toy.

To that, Spyro simply nodded with a thrilling croon. He then took a step back and turned away from the children, turning his attention to Zoe. He gave a snort of amusement before he leaned in and bit down on the string holding her in the air; the flimsy strings stood no chance against the dragon's sharp teeth and were instantly severed. Then, with a soft rumble, he leaned down and picked up the still-bound Zoe with his jaws, his teeth gripping the loops of string around her torso. She gave a huff as he lifted her up by her back, much like a cat would carry a kitten, leaving her to dangle in silent embarrassment. He paid her frustrations no mind as he scooped up her fallen items with his right claw.

He gave the furlings a soft, thankful look before turning away in a serpentine manner, his long form curving around like a great snake through the air, his footfalls as silent as ever as he made his way back to the cornfield, lowering his head to push the stalks out of the way.

"Wait!" Teresa suddenly called after him. Spyro paused, glancing back over his shoulder. "Do you have a name?"

The purple dragon stayed silent for a moment, as if pondering how to answer, before looking back one last time, draconian eyes gleaming in the light of the sun.

"Spyro."

And with that, he turned and silently slipped into the cornfield. They watched as the last of his long tails disappeared into the darkness of the stalks, which continue to bend and sway as he ran through them and back into the forest: the great beast returning to the dark woods from wence it came. The only sign that he had ever been there at all was a large patch of flattened grass where he laid, a pile of torn enchanted string that had once been a fairy trap, and three furlings that could barely believe such a world-shaking event had just happened…

…along with a heavy sadness lingering within their hearts, their little world suddenly feeling a lot smaller.

That evening after dinner, Mrs. Brisby couldn't figure out what was causing all this excitement amongst her children.

As she sat by the warm fire of the hearth, quietly humming to herself as she sewed together the beginnings of a new arm for Cynthia's damaged doll, she caught herself curiously glancing over to where they were playing. They were whispering to each other in hushed but no-less excited voices, as if they had an exciting new secret to share amongst each other. When she had asked what they were talking about, Cynthia, ever the chatter-box, had tried explaining to her about 'making friends with the sad purple monster', but was instantly shushed by her siblings.

In the end, Mrs. Brisby decided it must've been some game her children had been playing and left it at that.

It could've also had something to do with that supposed 'Fairy Attack' that Auntie Shrew had been outright raving about that morning; Mrs. Brisby's youngest son, Timothy, had woken up feeling unwell, so she had stayed

inside to tend to him. It was only when she overheard Auntie Shrew and Mr. Ages getting into a shouting match had she decided to come outside.

Auntie Shrew had *insisted* to heaven and back that she had caught a Feywild Fairy in one of her traps and had left the children in charge of watching over the intruder as she went to get help. But when she returned, accompanied by a *very* irate Mr. Ages, both carrying ropes and harnesses, she was outraged to find the trap severed and the supposed fairy missing. When Mrs. Brisby had asked her children about it, they denied ever seeing a fairy in the first place, claiming it was a butterfly that had been caught in the trap, much to Auntie Shrew's outraged objections.

Mr. Ages, on the other hand, had been furious that he'd been dragged all the way out here, away from his work, on account of mistaken identity. When Auntie Shrew furiously defended herself, pointing out that she had seen the fairy with her own eyes, he simply accused her of wasting his time with another of her paranoid fantasies.

The argument eventually escalated into a hysterical Auntie Shrew chasing the red-faced Ages away with her walking stick; a result of the rather offensive name he called her, all the while the children watched, overwhelmed with laughter.

Despite all the chaos of the day (and the words that she would now have to teach them not to say), it was genuinely good to see her children laughing again. Ever since Johnathan had passed away, they had all fallen into a state of loss, the holes his absence left in their hearts still fresh in most of them. So, to see them happy and playing again, even if by living in their own little magical world of make-believe…it brought a smile to her own face, a small glimpse of hope slowly returning to their lives.

Now all that was left was to hope that Timmy would be fine, and whatever he could be sick with wasn't too serious.

The young, widowed mouse could've never predicted that what looked like the start of a simple cold would become something much worse, or that the upcoming days would soon lead to an encounter she could never have imagined.

An encounter that would result in a chain of events that would ultimately change not only their lives, but the entire land of Nimh as a whole forever.

Chapter 8: A Visit to Ages

Chapter Text

FIVE DAYS LATER:

It is said that Love is the most powerful force in the universe. Stronger than even the strongest of spells and darkest of evils, and able to conquer all adversity.

If that is true, then the most powerful form of love itself is undoubtedly the love of a mother for her children: the eternal bond between parent and child, as ancient and eternal as life itself, nothing in the world as strong or as pure.

And in all the hearts that beat within the land of Nimh, perhaps no other beat with such love as the heart of Elizabeth Brisby.

As far as most rodentkin went, Mrs. Brisby was a very normal mouse. She was an exceptionally-beautiful doe, perhaps, but that didn't have an impact on how she lived. Like most of the mice that lived in the open plains of Nimh, she was a humble farm-mouse who lived by the way of the land: growing and harvesting the food that would feed her and her children through the continent's harsh winters. No means an adventurous nor glamorous life like the tales of old, by any means, but it was safe, comfortable, and warm.

And for a young mother whose children were the light of her life and heart alike, this was more than enough to ask for.

But even the happiest of lives can fall to the darkness of loss and sorrow.

It had been no more than about half a year ago, and she remembered the events leading up to that day well: It had begun like any other day, she and the rest of her family were working hard to gather the late summer harvest for winter, when a messenger from Rosebush City arrived at their doorstep

and handed Johnathan Brisby, her beloved husband, a summons from King Nicodemus. It wasn't the first time he had been summoned by the King of the Rats, but Mrs. Brisby wasn't happy to see it either way: every time he received those letters meant several weeks of him being gone, leaving her to worry for his safety.

But he promised her that he would be back before the first snowflake fell. So, goodbyes were said, kisses were shared, and she and her furlings watched him ride off into the horizon.

That would be the last time she ever saw him.

She had been cooking dinner that fateful autumn night when a heavy knocking rattled the door. At first, she thought her beloved Johnathan had come home early, and she rushed to open the door with a happy smile…but said smile faded when she saw Justin, Johnathan's friend from Rosebush City, standing on her doorstep instead. The normally cheerful and clever-witted rat's eyes were wet and mournful, and he could only meet her gaze with an apologetic loss, all the while holding Johnathan's broken sword to his chest.

He didn't even need to tell her the awful truth. She realized it the moment she saw the sword.

The tray of freshly-baked cheese bread she had been carrying fell to the floor with a clatter, and she followed soon after, as if the very world had been torn out from under her feet. Justin dropped the broken blade and caught her before she could hit the ground, holding her tight as she bawled her heart out into his shirt, letting her cry long and loud into the night.

Johnathan Brisby. Her husband. Her love. And the father of her children… was *dead*.

The following winter was especially cold that year.

But now said winter had passed, the snow melting away to the warmth of early spring, allowing her and her now-broken family to face the world again. The time spent sheltered in her home in the company of her furlings

had helped soothe the pain of her husband's death, if only a little. But with the arrival of spring came a troubling realization: Johnathan, who had always been the provider of the family, would no longer be around to lead the upcoming harvest, and all other harvests from this point on.

How was she going to take care of her home and feed her family without him?

They had barely managed to get through the past year, as none of their friends from Rosebush City could spare the time to aid her husband in the heavier farmwork; he did have help from the children, bless their hearts, but that was only with the minor things. It would be years before any of them, even Teresa, would be strong enough to help with the greater tasks. And yes, Auntie Shrew provided help whenever she came to visit, but that was barely a change: the shrew lived in Dapplewood, which was several days away from the stone, and could only visit every now and then when the year allowed it. Plus, while she was as 'spirited' as ever, she *was* getting older with each visit, and it wouldn't be too long before she was too old to make the trip, let alone help with the work.

As for herself? She was a simple housewife whose paws were soft and uncalloused, with no experience with a hoe or a plow. At best, she knew how to milk the livestock, do laundry, and cook meals, but was otherwise unfit for farm work.

And now she had an entire farm to grow and tend to on her own.

The idea of her children starving because of her own incompetence was *beyond* soul-crushing.

Then, as if the universe had decided that they hadn't suffered enough already, the claws of fate decided to cast another cruel hand to her family: her youngest son, Timothy, had fallen ill.

The fever had only reached a dangerous high the other day, but she suspected it may have started much sooner: during the earliest days of spring, when the cold of winter had passed but the frost was still covering the ground, she would allow her children to go out to play in the snow.

They had all been more than eager to, like every spring before: to finally leave the burrow after being cooped up inside for the entirety of winter. Perhaps it had been a little too early. Perhaps the cold was still lingering. Perhaps the snow, wet from melting but still clinging to the earth, wasn't dried off enough after their play.

Whatever the cause, it had now gotten *serious*.

It had started as a simple cough, nothing too troubling at first, but then it grew into raspy breathing and tightness of the chest. And soon enough, he had broken out into a full fever; one so high it left the poor furling's forehead burning hot to the touch and his fur wet with sweat, even as he shivered from loss of warmth. And despite her best efforts to help him, all the ointments and remedies she had stored in her cupboards, it was only getting worse.

It became clear that if he didn't get help soon, he wasn't going to make it.

Along with most of his duties as leader of the family, Johnathan had also always been the one to brave the wilds to visit Mr. Ages whenever needed. The list of predators that would be more than happy to snap up a defenseless mouse was *incredibly* long, and Johnathan was the only one of them who had any real survival-battle experience that he could use to fight them off.

But now that he was gone, it was another one of his previous tasks that now fell to her, and she was by no means prepared for an encounter with any short of hungry weasel, hawk, fox, etc.

Not only that, but it was the beginning of spring: everything that had spent the winter hibernating would be coming out soon, bellies empty and hungry for flesh.

The very thought of that alone had left poor Mrs. Brisby a wreck of nerves, even before she had left the safety of beneath the Stone. The wall of giant trees that stood at the western edge of the glade completely blocked out the horizon, casting a looming shadow over the forest floor. The entrance to the

main path looked to all the world like a cave maw leading into the depths of the earth, just waiting to devour all that foolishly wandered inside.

But she couldn't allow fear to win.

Timmy's life was in danger, and she would do whatever it took to save it.

So, after finishing a very early breakfast and making sure her children were safe with Auntie Shrew, she donned her cloak and set off on the long journey to the old ruins, the sun just staring to rise.

But against all expectations, the trip to the runs had been completely uneventful.

To the point of being unnatural.

For the entire time it took for Mrs. Brisby to get from her house to the ruins, the forest had been gravely silent. With the exception of a few insects in the brush and a few birds darting about the trees, she hadn't seen or heard a single trace of any other animal; not even the larger ones, which felt no fear toward the Rodentkin and their dug paths and would often cross it to get to the other side of the woods.

And during the scarce few times she had spotted them, they were as silent as the forest was: the insects remained still as stone where they were, which was often under things such as leaves and rocks, and didn't produce a single note of their daily chorus of life. As for the birds, she heard them more often than she saw them: the quick, frantic fluttering of wings as they darted from tree to tree, at speeds so fast Mrs. Brisby barely had time to look up and catch them in the act. They also moved beneath the canopy, avoiding the patches of open sky that dotted the sea of green.

The only sound that could be heard was the wind rustling the early-spring leaves in the trees and whistling through the grass.

Not a single cricket chirped. Not a single squirrel chattered. Not a single bird sang.

That honestly made it even scarier than usual.

The shade of the tall grass broke as Mrs. Brisby pushed the stalks aside, allowing the light of the mid-morning sun to shine upon her face.

She squeaked softly as she squinted against the glare, rubbing the string from her eyes with one hand and holding the grass to the side with the other. With a little effort, she managed to step through the thick tangle of plants and pull herself free, only for the skirt of her dress to catch on some loose roots. Still disoriented, she stumbled around and pulled her skirts loose from the plant's grasp, almost tripping over her own tail in the process.

She gave a sigh of relief as she gathered her footing, taking the moment to smooth the wrinkles out of her clothes, as well as shake off all the seed burrs and grass strips that were sticking to her; the fields were still dry and hard from winter's cold, and not as easy to travel through as it would be during summer.

Still, she had made it. It had taken a few hours, but she had arrived at her destination:

The Human Ruins.

Mrs. Brisby stared up in awe at the colossal structure, the once great building standing tall and imposing amongst the trees that surrounded it, even as it was slowly crumbling away to Time. Johnathan had been the one to first show it to her when they moved to the stone; he said it once served as home and fortress to one of the lording human families that ruled Nimh with an iron fist.

The…she couldn't quite remember the family name…the Fitz-something was all she could recall. According to him, it had once been a mighty and impressive castle of stone, made by stripping the very land of minerals to build where they wished, rather than build *with* the land as their kind did.

Now it was nothing more than a relic of a dead empire, slowly falling to the sands of time: the towers that were once as unmoving as the mountains were crumbling to dust and stone, mounds of broken rocks that had once been their walls piled at their bases. The wooden support beams had long rotted to breaking from both rain and termites, and anything that remains of the roofs of the main buildings had long since turned to dust. And the lands that had once been massive farms had been reclaimed by the forest years ago, with only the crumbled line of stone that had once been its borders to show the former boundaries, as were the twisted metal skeletons of the once-mighty machines of coal and steel that stood scattered about the trees, eaten away by centuries' worth of rust.

But where man had faded to time, the wilderness had stepped in to reclaim: moss painted the rocky surfaces in a deep green, while vines and roots ran down walls and through debris in a serpentine web of plants, painting a wild mosaic of life across the ruins.

She was also able to see animals living within the shelter of the ruins, safe from whatever was scaring the ones in the forest: birds nesting in the walls and perching on the remaining support beams, squirrels scampered about the halls and played amongst the rotten furniture, and feral rodents, the still-animal counterparts to the Rodentkin, scurrying about the rubble for scraps. There were even a few magical creatures as well, such as a school of will-o-wisps floating about the beams, the glowing jellyfish-like creatures swimming through the air as if it was water.

Mrs. Brisby paid little mind to it all as she hopped through a crevice in the farm's outer wall and hurried down the path; she was here for a reason and couldn't afford to waste it admiring the scenery.

KA-BOOOOM!

A loud explosion shook the ruins, sending the birds scattering to the sky and the critters fleeing to the forest in panic. Mrs. Brisby gave a frightened squeak as she instinctively dove for cover behind one of the ancient machines.

Shortly after the rumbling ceased, a large column of smoke rose from the ruins, accompanied by the strong smell of chemicals burning. The spooked doe peaked her head out from behind her hiding place, her nose wiggling as she sniffed the air; an action she regretted as the pungent stench burned her sinuses. Bad-smelling explosions seemed to be a common occurrence in these ruins, but she doubted she would ever get use to it no matter how many times she visited.

She coughed into her paws, clearing the smell from her throat as she returned to the path, her eyes slightly watering from irritation.

The doors to the main hall had long since rotted away, with only the rusted remains of the large door-buckles and handles scattered near the bases of the entrance to the castle; an entrance that towered over the small mouse and was easily wide enough to allow an entire line of mice to fit through at once. The ceiling was also all but gone at this point, with only the metal support beams still clinging to the top of the high walls, from which long vines hung down into the room. There were also trickles of water dribbling from them as well; the last bits of winter snow melting away in the midday sun to form large puddles across the stony floor.

There were four towers connected to the main hall, two on either side, that had a door leading into a spiral staircase within them: the staircases of the ones on the right both led downwards to the underground chambers, while the one on the left had the first leading down while the second led upwards towards what was left of the second floor.

It was in the underground chambers where Mr. Ages had moved into: the second tower on the right had a makeshift door of sticks and leaves built into its doorway, to replace the one that had long since turned to mulch.

Though said leaf-door was currently lying on the ground, having been blown off the frame, smoke rising from within. A result of the explosion that had happened seconds before.

As her eyes adjusted to the change in light, she realized that she wasn't alone in the ruins either. Laying in the middle of the grand hall, tucked away in its shell, sleeping the day away without a care in the world, was a

Common Box Turtle the size of a rhinoceros. The black, orange-spotted reptile was strapped via shell-harness to a large, four-wheeled wagon.

Mrs. Brisby recognized this turtle. It was Jedidiah, Ages' personal beast of burden. One that the old mouse only used when he was going on a trip, which he seemed to be preparing for, judging by the wagon.

Looks like she got here just in time.

As she approached, Jedidiah shifted in his sleep and cracked open a single ruby eye. When she saw her, he opened both eyes and lifted his head out of his shell with a pleased gurgle, his tiny tail wagging like a dog's. The mouse smiled warmly as she reached the reptile, placing her paws on the sides of his lower jaw and bringing his head to her, allowing him to nuzzle her cheek affectionately.

"It's good to see you too, Jed." She giggled as the turtle gently nibbled her cheek-fur.

After a moment of exchanging greetings, she pulled away and turned her attention to the wagon he was harnessed to. It was a supply wagon, the kind used for carrying large items and/or heavy loads, with larger wheels in the back for support.

And given the sheer size of the cargo, she understood why Ages had opted to use it.

A confused frown twisted her features as she examined them, though, as she was unable to tell what they were. They almost looked like rocks: large, flat rocks that were each easily bigger than she was, but were flat and wide like plates. It was as if Ages had taken a boulder and cut it up into bread-like slices...but they couldn't have been made of stone, as they had been wrapped completely in several layers of blankets and fastened down firmly with several ropes: as if they were incredibly fragile and needed to be as cushioned as much as possible, lest they break.

And their appearance was only half of the mystery.

She could *feel* something more about them. Something strange…something *foreboding*, deep in that instinctive ancient part of her blood. Not that the 'rocks' themselves were dangerous, but they were…*connected* to something that was, for lack of a better term. Like the ominous clouds on the distant horizon that preluded a raging storm that would destroy the land.

Yet for the life of her, she didn't know why.

She reached a paw out to touch the one sitting at the bottom of the pile.

What on earth were *they?*

CRASH!

A loud clatter of metal striking stone shattered the tense silence, followed closely by the angry yells of Mr. Ages. Another alarmed squeak escaped Mrs. Brisby's lips as she jumped several inches in the air, snatching her paw back to her bosom as if it had just touched hot iron.

From within the staircase to the lab came the scampering of several clawed feet and panicked animal shrieks, growing louder as they grew closer. Then, like a burst of smoke from a chimney, a horde of about three dozen feral mice came tumbling from the doorway, scrambling up from the depths in a panicked stampede of fur and squeaks, as if fleeing from an angry cat.

Mrs. Brisby followed suit, jumping up into the seat of the wagon to get out of their path. She sat down and watched with wide eyes as the rodents swarmed around the wagon like river-water around a large rock; they rocked the wooden transport a bit when they shoved each other against it, but otherwise avoided it completely as they scampered out the front door, followed by a very angry Mr. Ages, who swung a broom about like a club.

"OUT! *OUT*! ALL OF YOU MANGY BEASTS! GET OUT OF HERE!" He shouted in fury, swinging his makeshift weapon back and forth; he didn't let up until every last wild mouse had fled from the ruins altogether; only then did he flop back on his behind, wheezing for breath as he clutched his chest.

Despite the commotion, Mrs. Brisby was glad beyond words to see him.

"Oh, Mr. Ages…" She sighed with relief. "I'm *so* glad you're home!"

The old mouse coughed a haggard breath, taking his glasses off so he could wipe the sweat from his face with his sleeve.

"Primitive, disruptive vermin!" He snapped, winded from the exertion of his aging body. "No sense of respect for one's property! I'm beginning to see why the humans didn't care for them…"

It was then that he finally noticed the doe watching him from the seat of his wagon.

"Oh. Elizabeth…wasn't expecting you." He stated simply as she clambered back to his feet, before his face turned into a displeased scowl. "I *assume* the purpose of this visit is of *actual* importance this time, and not more of your aunt's 'fairy' nonsense…"

"O-Oh, yes…I-I do apologize for all that." Mrs. Brisby stammered apologetically as she stepped down from the wagon's seat, taking care not to step on her skirt as she did so. She couldn't stop her eyes from wandering to the top of his head at those words, or more specifically at the large red bump that was poking out through his fur; a courtesy of Auntie Shrew's walking stick following their argument. "Mrs. Shrew means well, but she can get…well…a little excited about these things."

"That's putting it *too* kindly..." Mr. Ages grumbled, aware that she was staring at the bump, which was still sore. He took off his glasses to clean them, wiping them with the edge of his work tunic. "If an apology is all you're here for, then I must ask that you leave." He said as he turned away to head back to his lab. "I'm currently dealing with something *extremely* import-ACK!"

He was cut off as a heavy weight seized his tail, pulling him back mid-step and causing him to fall on his rump again. Flustered, he scrambled to look over his shoulder, only to see Jedidiah's foot pinning his tail to the floor.

"J-Jedidiah! Get off, you cantankerous shellfish!" He snapped, trying to pull his tail free but with no success.

Jedidiah stared at him with a flat, almost disapproving stare, as much of one that a reptile's face could make. With a guttural hiss, the turtle motioned its head to Mrs. Brisby, who was watching with a nervous silence, as if prompting the older mouse to give her a moment. 'You can spare a moment of your "precious time" to hear her out', he seemed to say.

"Mr. Ages, I'm truly sorry for disturbing your work, but this is an emergency!" Mrs. Brisby pleaded, remembering why she was here. "It's my son, Timmy! He's gotten so sick..."

"*Timmy*? The youngest boy, right?" Mr. Ages asked, adjusted his glasses as he tried (and failed) to pull himself free. "Well, it's nothing a little pipsissewa-"

"*No*!" Mrs. Brisby cried, shaking him desperately by the shirt. "No, he's sick with a *fever*!"

That gave Mr. Ages pause, a look of genuine, if conflicted, concern coming over his face. Looking between the desperation in the eyes of his friend's widow, and the fact that Jedidiah wasn't going to let him go unless he helped her, he ultimately gave in, shaking his head in exasperation.

"Well…oh, I *suppose* I could fix up something." He grumbled.

The brown-furred mouse beamed with joy. "Oh, thank you!" She exclaimed as Jedidiah gave a grunt of approval, lifting his foot and allowing Mr. Ages to stand and dust himself off. The older mouse then returned to the door to his lab, motioning her to follow.

"Follow me but *don't* touch anything, understand?" She nodded in response before following him down the staircase. "Now, just how high *is* his fever?"

"He's burning hot to the touch." Mrs. Brisby explained as they traveled down into the dark depths of the ruins. "And soaking wet with perspiration, but he shivers with cold at the same time."

"Keep him wrapped in a blanket?" Ages continued to ask.

"I do."

"And his pulse?"

"So fast that you cannot tell one heartbeat from the other."

"His tongue?"

"So coated that it looks purple."

"How does he breathe?"

"Very rapidly, and there's a raspy sound when he does, as if he can't catch his breath."

"But he does not cough."

"No." By the time she had answered all of his questions, they had reached the bottom of the stairwell.

Mr. Ages' home had once been a large storage cellar for the castle, converted into a makeshift house/laboratory by the old mouse; deep underground, protected by the very earth from the elements and intruders alike. The lab was made up of the old alchemist machines and instruments that had been relocated down here, rusted and worn down by time, but kept in functional shape; the large candle-lamp for boiling potions stood in the very center of the lab, connected to many glass tubes and bottles for mixing and boiling chemicals. The inside of the room was simple yet homey, with rabbit-pelt carpets across the floor and many old decorations, herbs, and tools hanging from the walls.

Mr. Ages walked over to his work desk, which was littered with all sorts of items: books for alchemy, open on pages of illustrations of ingredients. Numerous clay pots and bowls, some empty while others were filled with either powder or caked plaster, and glass vials filled with different colored liquids, to name the more common ones. He cleared out a spot, pushing items to the side and picking up a single bowl from the clutter.

He then cleared his throat before making his diagnosis: "Your son has Pneumonia."

"*Pneumonia*?" Mrs. Brisby repeated; she had never heard of it, but the very name sounded monstrous.

"It's not an uncommon disease, but without treatment you *will* die from it." He told her, gathering ingredients from different containers around his desk, mixing them together with the pestle he kept tied to his belt.

"Oh, please Frith, no…" she muttered to herself, the icy grip of dread squeezing her heart. Wasn't it enough to lose Johnathan to the cruel jaws of death? Was she cursed to lose Timothy, *her own son*, as well? The mere idea of it nearly broke her, and it was all she could do to hold her resolve and not openly cry.

"The most important thing is that your son stays warm. Keep him in bed and bundle him up." Mr. Ages instructed her as he continued to make the medicine, pulling down a string that hung overhead. The candle-lamp shot a steady stream of flame toward one of the glass pipes, heating the ball base and forcing the liquid inside to a boil. Said liquid traveled through the winding tube until it dripped from the end of the nozzle into the bowl in his hands. "Not to go outside for at least…at least three weeks." He concluded as he continued to add ingredients.

"But the farming is about to begin. A-And Moving Day will be coming to Dapplewood soon." Mrs. Brisby stammered; two events that required as many Rodentkin to help as possible.

"*Absolutely not*!" Mr. Ages snapped in a warning tone. "Your son is in *no* condition to partake in either of them! His lungs will be *incredibly* sensitive to the cold, even after he takes this medicine: one breath of winter's chill *will* be the death of him." Brisby wordlessly nodded, dropping the subjects entirely, watching silently as Ages poured the medicine mixture into a large envelope of paper. "He must stay in bed. Now, mix this-…this powder into a broth and make him drink it." He instructed her. "It will bring down the fever."

"Oh, bless you sir!" Mrs. Brisby said with immense gratitude as she was handed the envelope.

"No, bless yourself. You'll need it." He told her as he led her back to the stairwell. However, at the first step, he paused, another conflicted look coming over his face.

"Actually, there is *another* matter that may very well concern you and your family." He said with a little hesitation. He then motioned her to follow, and the two began to climb back up the stairs. "Tell me: have you seen anything *unusual* in the forest as of late?" He asked.

The doe blinked in confusion. "What do you mean?" she asked, hugging the medicine to her chest.

Mr. Ages paused for a moment before speaking again. "There's been these strange…*happenings* taking place over the past couple of days, and it's causing all the animals to act strangely. I'm sure you've noticed all the *new additions* to the ruins." That last point was said with heavy distaste.

Mrs. Brisby nodded, her mind wandering back to her trip through it…and how deathly quiet it had been. "The forest was strangely quiet today." She told him. "I barely saw any other animals. Are they all here?"

"Some of them. There's *something new* in the forest, and it's been scaring them out of their usual territories or into complete silence." Mr. Ages warned her in a dark tone. "The birds refuse to sing out of fear of altering it to their presence, and the critters have either fled to safer pastures or remain hiding within their burrows." He shook his head in confusion. "Not even wolves can bring that kind of fear throughout the woodlands."

"Is it Dragon?" She asked in fret; the giant cat was the only creature she knew of that could have such influences over the land. Him and the Great Owl, but the Owl never came out during the day.

Mr. Ages shook his head. "No, no. It would actually be *easier* to explain it all if it was." He told her. "For the past five days, I've been investigating the woods and found several traces of a potentially-new creature: Truly

enormous footprints of the likes I had never seen before, that don't match anything within the Bestiary Records of Rosebush's Archives."

He paused to catch his breath, and to clean his glasses again.

"I'm afraid, Mrs. Brisby, that we could be looking at the arrival of a *new* Titan Beast."

That brought a look of alarm to the young mother's face. A *new* Titan Beast?! As if Dragon and the Great Owl weren't enough, there was the chance that a *third* one had come to Nimh?

And it was in the forest near her home?!

"I felt that you needed to know, given that you or your children might encounter it." He warned her. "If this creature ever comes near the farm, barricade yourself and your family in your home and do not come out until it leaves." They reached the top of the stairs, stepping out into the main hall of the ruins. "And pray to Frith that will be enough."

"B-But what if there's an emergency?" she asked. "What if Timmy needs more medicine?"

"The medicine I made you will be enough to last until he fully recovers." Mr. Ages told her as climbed up into his wagon. Jedidiah took this as the sign to get ready, slowly extending his legs from his shell and standing up with a bit of effort, causing the wagon to bob with his movement. "That being said, I'm going to Rosebush City to report my findings to Nicodemus, and I won't be back until Dapplewood's Moving Day."

He sat down and took the reins, but as he did, he pointed to the envelope she held with urgent emphasis.

"That envelope is the *only* one you'll have until then; whatever you do, *do* ***not*** *lose it*, or Timothy *will* die. Do you understand?"

Mrs. Brisby nodded vigorously; the only thing that could save her son's life now rested in her hands. If it was lost, then so was Timmy.

"I understand." She told him, hugging her very precious cargo as if her own life depended on it, eyes wet from several emotions. "Thank you once again."

The old mouse simply waved her off before he lightly whipped the reins against Jedidiah's shell; even if he wasn't doing it gently, the sheer strength of the box turtle's natural armor made it impossible to be harmed by the whip. But the sensation was enough to signal it was time to move, and Jedidiah took the first steps of the long journey to Rosebush City; the wagon's wheels creaked under the weight of their cargo as they began to turn, but the reptile had no problem with said weight, effortlessly pulling it along as if it was nothing.

Mrs. Brisby followed them out of the ruins, stopping in the doorway to watch them travel down the road to Dapplewood, which would eventually lead to Rosebush City.

The same road Johnathan had taken on his very last adventure.

"Thank you so-!" She began to call after them, clutching the envelope even tighter to her bosom; her voice faltered as she realized that they were slowly moving out of hearing range. "-much…Goodbye." She murmured instinctively, even though she knew they couldn't hear her. She waited for a little longer to watch them go, until she decided it was time to leave herself; Timmy was waiting for the relief the medicine would provide.

She tucked the envelope into her cloak and wrapped said cloak around her for extra protection before beginning her own trip home.

Chapter 9: Sharp Teeth, Kind Heart

Chapter Text

She was about halfway home when she saw the footprints for herself.

Mrs. Brisby stood there, at the base of the massive tree that overhung the open path, frozen in shock at the sight of the trail of massive prints that led across it; an icy chill that had nothing to do with the cold ran through her very bones at the sight of them. The wind blew gently through the leaves, the gentle rustling being the only noise she could hear throughout the woods, creating an ominous silence that was only amplified by the appearance of the tracks.

They were *gigantic*. Each one on their own was large enough for her to lay in, stretched straight from nose to tail tip, without discomfort; they were deep too, up to her knees in depth, telling of the sheer size of the beast that made them. There were two individual sets of footprints, one for each set of legs, showing that it was a creature that walked on all fours. The prints of the hind feet looked like those of a bird or lizard, though they had no backwards-facing 'thumb': just four long, spread-out toes that ended in the grooves of sharp claws. The prints of the front feet were peculiar, though: they almost looked like a human or fairy's hand-print with four fingers and a thumb, albeit with a reptilian shape and even longer claws. And both had light but clear imprints of sharp, patterned grooves in the dirt; scales, like those of Jedidiah's footprints.

And worst of all: they were *fresh*, the mud still wet and smeared around the edges.

But it wasn't *just* the size and appearance of these monstrous footprints that made the mouse doe's throat clench in horror. It was *where* they were that made her heart seize in her chest.

How close they were to her home.

She quietly thanked Frith numerous times that Ages had the wisdom and kindness to warn her of this creature before he had left: what would've happened had they set off for the upcoming Moving Day without any knowledge beforehand, only to end up crossing paths with this beast while it was on the hunt? She would've been helpless to protect her family (and herself) from becoming a meal for this horrid creature.

She also thanked Frith to see that the footprints were heading in the opposite direction of the Lee of the Stone, leading deeper into the forest: there was a clear path in the grass where it had gone, the stalks flattened out from where it had pushed its way through.

But the beast knew the path was here. A path that was used by other animals for travel as well, which made it the perfect spot to ambush prey. It was only a matter of time before it would return.

Not only that, but it was also very likely it would follow the path as well.

Right to the Stone.

She gave the large tunnel a wary stare as she tip-toed past it, giving it and the footprints a wide birth, before scurrying off into the brush. She pushed her way through the grass and hopped across the rough terrain in the direction of the Stone.

It wasn't as easy to traverse as the path, but that way wasn't safe anymore.

As she continued home, she mentally debated what she should do: the news that a third Titan Beast had made its home in this very forest was earth-shaking, to say the least.

They had lived in the protection of the Stone for years, safe in its stretching shadow from all airborne predators and the weather. Its safety was the very reason Johnathan had moved them here in the first place, far from the troubles of Rosebush City and the dangers of the open wilds alike.

To think that safety was now compromised by the first new Titan Beast since the birth of Dragon…of all the places in all of Nimh…

They may very well have to leave.

The very idea was heart-breaking, and she had to bite back a whimper when the idea crossed her mind. She *loved* this place: Johnathan had built it for them with his own two paws, pouring almost an entire year of his life giving it everything it needed for them and their children: it was safe, homely, and warm: everything a mouse could ask for. Food on the table, warm beds to sleep in, strong walls to protect them from the harsh world outside.

To leave it…to throw all that he had built away to flee back to the city they left in the first place…merely thinking about doing so felt like throwing away a piece of her heart.

But what else could they do?

If those footprints were anything to judge by, this new beast was more than large and strong enough to tear into her house to get to them. And if it was anything like Dragon, then they had to get away before it found them, or there would all be devoured. Consumed in a monster's dark thirst for blood.

It was too dangerous to stay.

The farm-mouse scurried across the fallen branch that laid across the old frog-pond, taking a shortcut across it. While the pond was now free from the thick layer of ice that covered it, a few stray pieces could be seen melting away at the edges of the water, slowly dripping down into the still-cold waters below. Not a single frog or toad that lived along its banks could be seen, still hibernating within the mud at the bottom; it would be a few more days before they would start to awaken to the change in temperature.

With a running jump, she leaped from the edge of the branch over the last bit of distance across the pond...and ended up missing the shore just a tad.

She yelped in shock as she landed in the water with a splash; it wasn't very deep, only coming up to her shins, but *Frith Above* was it *cold*.

She awkwardly stumbled out of the pond and onto its banks, hoisting her now-soaked skirts up to her knees with one paw while holding her envelope with the other. She kicked her hind legs vigorously, one foot at a time, to shake the icy water from them. She then set the medicine to the side so she could wring her skirts out of what little more she could rid herself of, splattering the muddy shore with cold drops of water. After which she silently retrieved the envelope and continued on, now cold, wet, and even more miserable.

That was another problem with leaving; one that had nothing to do with and was far more concerning than mere sentimental value. The very reason she had come out in the first place: Timothy was too sick to move.

Three weeks. That's how long Mr. Ages said they had to keep Timmy in bed, and any attempt to shorten that time would make the pneumonia even worse: one breath of the dying winter's chill would kill him. That's what Ages had said. She couldn't move him out of the house, let alone make the journey to the city under such conditions. Even the trip to Dapplewood, the nearest rodentkin settlement, could take up to three days, depending on how often they stopped and rested. And the journey to Rosebush City would be far longer.

The only means to escape *now* would result in Timmy being left behind, and that thought was banished from her mind before it even formed; she would sooner throw herself to the monster than even consider abandoning her children.

Besides, who would say they would be any safer there than they were here?

Rosebush City certainly would be: being an underground city built into the depths of a great mountain made it an natural fortress that stood against enemies and monsters alike. The walls of outer rock were covered with damage from when war had tried to tear it down, but it remained as strong and unmovable as always. As was the very nature of a mountain.

Dapplewood, on the other hand, was an open forest community that built their homes in the roots of the trees. A Titan Beast could just as easily break

through their walls and feast upon the helpless rodentkin who lived there as easily as it could tear into her home and feast on them.

The more she tried to think it out, the more it began to seem like a truly hopeless situation.

She quietly slipped under the leaves of the bush and stepped out into the open forest floor as she made up her mind: The only way she could think of where they all made it out would be to brave out the three weeks of recovery, and then make a break for Dapplewood as soon as possible, and then to Rosebush City.

She debated this idea in her mind as she trodded through the grass, only paying partial attention to her surroundings: the food stores they had stashed for the winter were almost gone, but there should be enough left to last for the three weeks. They might also be able to gather some roots and wild beets from around the glade, or some of the berry buds if it wasn't too early for that. It would have to do: they couldn't be outside for too long, let alone long enough to tend to the crops, and by no means was she letting any of them leave the Ston-

She had been so caught up in her internal struggle that she didn't pay attention to her surroundings, and thus never noticed the telltale signs beforehand.

However, when she rounded the base of the giant tree and the sight came into view, her focus immediately snapped to full attention and she skidded to a halt, breath hitching in her throat and eyes widening in terror.

It was a weasel, as large as a lion and almost twice as long. The serpentine mammal had its back turned to her, its black-tipped tail swishing back and forth, as it greedily dug into the freshly-killed corpse of its prey: an unfortunate El-ahrian that had wondered too far from the Burrow Hills. The predator's own focus was purely on its meal, pushing one paw against the rabbit's side to noisily rip a strip of bloodied meat from the carcass; the weasel's snout and maw were soaked red with blood, as was the ground around the disemboweled rabbit. It noisily scarfed the mouthful down

before plunging its head back into its meal, spilling the entrails of it across the dirt.

It was all Mrs. Brisby could do to keep from throwing up at the sight, covering her snout with her paws in a futile attempt to keep the metallic stench out of her nose and mouth, as well as keep the scream from escaping her throat.

She had let her guard down. She had been lulled into a false of security by the unnatural silence and was so wrapped up in her thoughts that she had completely forgotten to watch out for all the other dangers of a mouse's very existence. Had she been paying attention she would've heard the predator, or smelled the kill, from a mile away.

But the weasel hadn't noticed her either. It was far too invested in gorging itself on El-ahrian flesh, the rabbit blood covering its snout masking her scent. There was still a chance to escape.

Not taking her eyes off the danger in front of her, she took a very slow and very quiet step backwards, making as little to no noise as possible. The moss on the ground barely made a sound beneath her paws as she slowly backed away back to the tree she had rounded. All the while the oblivious predator continued to eat.

The harsh snap of a breaking twig echoed in the distance; that prompted the weasel to pause, looking up in the direction of the noise with an alerted growl. Luckily, it was in the opposite direction Mrs. Brisby was, and she took the opportunity to duck behind a root of the tree, flattening herself to the ground. The weasel glanced about, sharp golden eyes narrowed in suspicion, but when nothing ultimately came of the noise it returned back to its food, the viscera sound of tearing flesh filling the area once more.

The terrified mouse didn't dare take her eyes off the mustela until she was back behind the tree, completely hidden from its potential view. She pressed her back against it, shaking like a leaf as she tried to calm the frantic beating of her heart. As she readied to flee, she tucked Timmy's medicine into the inside of her cloak, making double sure it was secured in place.

She squeezed her eyes shut, mentally counting down in silence…and then she hopped out from the behind the roots and turned to flee…

…only to come face to face with a second weasel, one with a darker brown coat and amber-orange eyes, stepping out from the grass right in front of her.

The second weasel paused mid-step, clearly caught off guard by a mouse suddenly leaping out into its path. But said surprise quickly turned into outright-malicious anticipation as its lips curled into a wicked, tooth-baring grin. Mrs. Brisby froze in fear as the grin split open into an open-mouth snarl, a sharp, almost-reptilian hiss rattling from behind its flesh-piercing teeth, as its long tongue licked at its fangs in preparation. Her heart was hammering inside her breast and her lungs heaved in her ribs: adrenaline kicked in like the strike of a lightning bolt, readying her body for the chase that was about to begin.

One that began its own countdown as the weasel slowly crouched back for the kill…

…and in the *exact instant* the predator lunged, she bolted for it: the jaws of death snapped the space she had been occupying mere milliseconds before, just missing her tail.

All thoughts of self-presentation were abandoned the moment she took off running on all fours, looking to all the world like a feral mouse in clothing. She scurried through the undergrowth of the forest as fast as her paws could carry her, ignoring the twigs that tore at her cloak, and the rocks that scraped and bruised her fingers and toes; the sound of snapping branches and angry snarls were right behind her as the weasel bounded after her, snapping and slashing through bushes and grass as it gave chase.

She didn't dare look back, lest she trip, her every fiber of being focused purely on escape. On *survival*.

She scrambled up the side of a large root in an attempt to evade her pursuer, tiny claws outright tearing at the bark as she climbed up it. The weasel leapt in an arching pounce to grab her, this time catching the hem of her cloak in

its teeth. Mrs. Brisby gave a choked cry of panic as the fabric pulled taught around her neck, causing her to choke as she hysterically clawed away; with just enough strength, the edge of the cloak tore free in the predator's jaws, the sudden release of tension throwing her up and over the edge of the root. She hit the ground on the other side running, stumbling as she used a paw to loosen the grip of her throat, taking a much-needed breath of air.

The weasel snarled in frustration as it fell back down on the other side, spitting the torn shreds of fabric from its mouth before climbing up after her.

Knowing she had only gained a few seconds of distance, Mrs. Brisby fled deeper into the woods, bursting out of the undergrowth and out into a clearing beneath the trees.

It was there she spotted it; a massive, age-worn log covered in moss and vines, stretched across the forest floor, and propped up upon a cresting hill like a giant slide. The mouth at the base of the hill looked like the looming maw of a great cave to the mouse, its insides hollowed out by age, mold, and insects, creating a natural tunnel of wood and moss, with the other end resting at the top of the hill.

Without a second thought she made a sharp turn to the right, going straight for the log; the move cost her the distance she had gained, and the weasel was instant back at her heels, its flexible body especially built for making sudden turns.

Another barking snarl made her glance back, only to see the first weasel had joined the case, its mouth still soaked red in rabbit's blood. The instinct to chase prey was not easily ignored, even when a kill had already been made.

Having two sets of teeth snapping at her heels only motivated her to run even faster, adrenaline coursing through her veins. But she didn't head towards the base entrance; instead, she ran along the side of it, leading her pursuers away from said entrance. The side of the log, especially around the base on the ground, was full of much smaller holes leading into its interior, eaten away by wood-burrowing grubs.

And when she saw one that was just big enough for her, she took the chance and dove into it.

It was almost too small for her, forcing her to wriggle through, but that meant it was far too small for a weasel; she wriggled her hips free just as the weasel lunged at her, and she rolled out of danger just in time.

The mustela's face stretched against the edges of the hole that was too small for its skull to fit through. It snarled and snapped angrily at the frightened mouse just out of its reach, thrashing against the wooden frame that held it back from its prey, but didn't budge…at least, at first. The wet, moldy wood began to crack and chip away to the creature's struggle, the head beginning to squeeze through as it continued to claw and dig at the entrance, all the while savagely biting at the air with an outright-rabid ferocity.

Mrs. Brisby didn't wait to see if it would hold. She scrambled to her feet and scurried up the log to the exit on the top of the hill. The moist, moss-covered floor of the log proved difficult to climb, and she ended up kicking a bunch of loose chunks of wood, as well as a few pillbugs and grubs, behind her as she ascended. The pillbugs in her path either crawled out of her way or curled up into a ball and got knocked aside, rolling down towards the weasels that were starting to break their way through.

This was her chance. If she could get out of the log before they got through, she could lose them. Get out of their sight and find a place to hide, then wait until they give up trying to find her scent again. Then she was home free.

When she reached the exit at the top of the hill, she didn't waste a single second: with a strong kick of her back legs, she leapt out of the log's mouth with all her might, eager to gain as much traction as she could.

Only to find her paws catching nothing but open air.

The heart-seizing realization came to her in an instant as she saw just how far the ground was below, time crawling to a standstill as her eyes widened and mouth fell open in pure panic.

It wasn't a hill the log was leaning against. It was a *cliff*.

And she had just jumped off of it.

For a brief moment, she felt as though she was suspended in thin air, frozen between the sky and the earth…then time slowly resumed its pace as gravity took hold, and the world became a blur as she fell. A weak cry escaped the mouse's lips as she plummeted, clawing at the air in desperate instinct to break her fall. It was to no avail, of course, and she could only close her eyes and brace herself as the seconds counted down…one…two…three…

CRASH!

She hit the ground not with the thud of earth, but with a loud, rough clatter of something hard yet loose; her body screamed in pain as she hit what felt like a pile of stones, the wind knocked from her lungs. She didn't even have time to register the first bout of agony before the next came as she was sent tumbling down the base of the cliff into the dried-out riverbed; each blow only led to another as she rolled head over heels down the slope, kicking up a rain of gravel behind her. She slammed face-first into what felt like a large rock as she crashed against it on her way down, causing her vision to go white as pain exploded through her skull.

By Frith's mercy, the ground began to level out, and her tumble slowed until she came to a stop on level ground in the middle of the riverbed, upon the pile of loose rocks. Where she lay for what felt like an eternity, curled up into a bloody, bruised ball, her body in *excruciating* pain.

Every heaving breath felt like red-hot hooks pulling at her lungs, coming in deep, croaking gasps, her rib-cage feeling as if it were crushed in on itself. The palms of her hands and the underside of her wrists had been scraped raw from the tumble, while blood trickled out from beneath her matted hair and from her bruised nose, mixing with the large tears that rolled down her face and whiskers. Her head swam with all the horrible sensations wracking her form, causing her mind to flicker in and out of consciousness.

She wanted nothing more in that moment than to just pass out and be free of the pain. To just make it end, if only for a moment.

But she knew she couldn't; amongst the hazy ringing in her ears, she could already hear the distant snarls of the two weasels, who were no doubt already on their way up the log.

So, in spite of her body's pleas for relief, she rolled over and struggled to lift herself, eyes still tightly scrunched shut in pain. Her scraped palms burned in protest as she pushed herself up into an upright position against the pebble-covered earth. The smaller ones shifted under her weight, causing her body to give and ache with each sudden movement…and yet, even in her pain, she could feel something was off about these 'stones'. Their texture was wrong; they were jagged but not sharp. Smooth but not perfectly so.

A harsh, wet cough erupted from her throat, clearing her sinuses of the blood that had been blocking it…and it was then she smelled it: none other than the truly-revolting smell of dead flesh, both fresh and rotting, as well as the metallic odor of blood that was not her own.

The very air around her was *filled* with it…as if-

A cold dread seized her chest, and with a bit of effort, she managed to open her watery eyes.

Only to find herself face to face with death.

She screamed in alarm, frantically scrambling away from the blooded skull of a feral rat, whose snout had been mere inches from her own. Empty eye sockets stared blankly into oblivion. Dried blood caked the entire thing in a layer of filthy red. And what remained of the stump trailed behind it in a bloody pile of entrails: whatever had separated the head from the body had not been clean about it. It laid there, flies buzzing around its rotting remains, surrounded by the remains of oth-

She looked down. At the 'stones' that she was currently sitting on, and her heart seized in absolute horror. They were not pebbles.

They were *bones*.

The bones of *dozens* of small animals. Rats, squirrels, moles, hedgehogs, small birds, and more, scattered about in a pile of the dead. No skeleton was complete; the most intact were little more than skulls and limbless torsos (some of which missing half of said torso). They had been picked clean of most flesh but were still stained red with blood, along with the few scraps of meat that lingered; some of it was rotting from time, while others were *still fresh*.

She looked down at her trembling paws, her palms soaked in blood that she now knew was not hers. Her jaw quivered as the urge to scream, or throw up, or even both built within her.

Then she made the mistake of looking up. To what was, without question, the absolute most horrifying thing Mrs. Brisby had ever seen in her entire life.

A Mass Grave. That was the *only* thing it could be described as; an image straight out of the depths of the underworld itself. *Hundreds* of corpses, both freshly-killed bodies and picked-clean skeletons, from all forms of animal filled out the bloody riverbed.

There were bodies of animals as large as fully-grown deer and wild boar, their torsos hollowed out and emptied of their entrails, while their limbs were stripped of meat with truly-gigantic bite-marks in the bones. The remains of medium-sized animals, like foxes, raccoons, rabbits, larger birds, and wild goats looked as if they had been torn in half and messily devoured in single bites, the severed remains, heads, limbs, and tails scattered about when the jaws had bitten down in the middle. The only thing that could be found left over of the smaller animals were the heads and smaller bits that had been bitten off when they had been devoured whole. Entire clouds of files, from normal sized ones to the grape-sized Nimh variety, filled the air in a buzzing cacophony of rot, eager to feast on the leftovers. And the ground, once dry from the winter's frost, was soaked a deep red with blood, tricking across the stones like water and forming large pools throughout the bed.

The mouse couldn't move a single muscle, even as her instincts *screamed* at her too; she was utterly petrified with sheer *horror*, her blood turning to ice in her veins. All she could do was tremble like a leaf in a hurricane, her wide eyes dilating with primal fear and her heart beating so fast it felt like it was going to burst.

This was the reason the forest was as silent as death, for that was exactly what had taken it. *This* was why all the animals had fled the forest…those that were still alive, that is.

For all who hadn't had been killed. Slaughtered by the *hundreds*.

Hunted down in mass and devoured by the jaws of Nimh's new Titan Beast.

Chunks of dirt clattered down from above, snapping her back to her current reality: she looked up to see the weasels had already begun their own descent down the cliff face. Unlike her, they hadn't jumped blindly into the abyss and instead were taking the slower but safer path of climbing down, their long, flexible bodies far more suited to traversing such treacherous terrain.

With a frightened and outright desperate sob, Mrs. Brisby tried to get up and start running again, but no sooner did she try did her left leg explode in pain, causing her to cry out and fall back into the bones. As the angry snarls grew ever closer, she looked down with tear-filled eyes; her left ankle was *heavily* swollen, the redden skin of said swelling visible through her fur.

'No! Please Frith, no!' She quietly begged as she tried to crawl away, desperation gripping her heart.

But it was too late; when it had gotten down far enough, the second weasel took a mighty leap from the cliff base and soared through the air. Mrs. Brisby barely had time to roll over when a massive paw slammed into her chest and pinned her back to the dirt, the weight of her captor causing them to skid through the bones with a clatter. She squirmed and squealed wildly, but the grip on her body was as strong as the claws were sharp.

Then it leaned in, jaws opening to take the first bite.

"WAIT!" She screamed in desperation. *"PLEASE!"*

In all surprise the weasel did pause at her cry, though it looked more amused than anything else, tail swishing back and forth as it kept her pinned.

Then it spoke.

"Hmmm…Mousey morsel begs?" Its voice was cruel and hissing, matching the glint of malice in its eyes. "Wishes to live, mousey does?"

"Please! I *beg* you! Let me go!" She sobbed, fresh tears rolling down her face. "I have four furlings at home, and one is very sick! *Please,* I'm all they have left in the world!"

To that, however, the weasel openly *laughed*, unmoved by her pleas, before looking down at her with a truly malicious grin.

"Mousey morsel now…furling feast for desert later."

The mouse's eyes widened in terror, and her struggles became frantic. "Why?!" She cried desperately. "Look around! You have all the meat you could eat here!" She pointed to the first weasel (the one who had been eating the rabbit), who was already helping itself to the leftovers of a dead sparrow.

"Dead Flesh old and taste bitter. Eat later." It scoffed, as if it was obvious. It lowered its head closer, golden eyes gleaming with evil anticipation as the hungry jaws opened again. Drool dripped down its long fangs and onto her terrified face, the sharp teeth glinting in the sunlight. "Mousey fresh and sweet, and chase made one hungry. Eat now, while still so."

"No…*NO! PLEASE, NO!*" Mrs. Brisby cried in horror, mouth agape and quivering while tears dripped from her cheek-fur.

This was it. All these years she had struggled to survive, and then to protect her family, all about to end. As she stared into the approaching jaws of death, the most impactful moments of her life flashed before her eyes. Her

life as a feral, meeting Johnathan for the first time, their wedding in Rosebush City, building their home the Lee of the Stone, and her wonderful children. Then she imagined them, waiting for her to come home that very night, only for her never to return. She imagined them growing up orphans, losing both their parents to the cruel world, Frith knows what kind of lives awaited them…except for Timothy, who would never get his medicine now; he would die soon as well, and only as a child.

She squeezed her eyes shut and braced herself, wanting nothing more in that instant to see her furlings one last time. *'Teresa, Martin, Cynthia, Timothy, Johnathan! I'm so sorry!'*

Then everything went dark when the very sun itself disappeared behind a wall of purple and gold.

C-C-CRUNCH!

The weasel's eyes bulged from their sockets as a massive pair of jaws as large as it was clamped down around its torso with enough strength and force to completely shatter its rib-cage. Teeth the size of swords penetrated deep, blood splattering across lips covered in scales, as well as bursting from the weasel’s mouth as it spat up its crushed insides.

This all happened in an instant, which was followed by a thunderous crash that shook the very earth as if the planet had been struck by a meteor. The weight of the paw pinning her chest disappeared and she was sent tumbling away, rolling head over heels. She heard the once fearsome predator shriek for its dying life, thrashing wildly as it was lifted clean off the ground and into the air.

Head spinning from the tumble and terror of facing death, she woozily opened her eyes, half-expecting to wake up in Frith's Realm, greeted by her beloved husband.

What she saw instead questioned if Frith even existed at all; the fear of the weasel was quickly forgotten entirely, and she clutched the sides of her face as she stared up in pure, unadulterated terror.

The ancient and primal *terror* that could only be awakened in mortal hearts by none other than the mightiest creature in all of creation.

A powerful beast larger than any creature she had ever seen before. An armored hide of scales stronger than even the most durable of steel, and a more beautiful purple than the purest of amethysts. Enormous crimson wings that filled the sky behind its shoulders. A seemingly-endless tail as long as a river and lined with deadly sword-like spines. Mighty horns and spines that adorned its head like the crown of the true king of all beasts. Teeth that were like swords. Claws that were like spears. And eyes that burned with the internal flame that would destroy all its breath blew upon.

Another sickening crunch of flesh and bone rattled throughout the chasm, followed by a wet thud of flesh against stone as the weasel that had just been chasing her fell to the ground in a bloody heap…or at least *part* of it did: the body from the arms up, one arm missing. Its eyes that once shone with a cruel, ferocious glint now stared lifelessly into the abyss, its face forever frozen in a silent scream of agony, blood pooling from its open jaws. Though the small trickle from its mouth was pitiful compared to the gushing viscera that pooled from the torn end of its remains, strips of severed muscle and what few entrails that clung to its upper rib-cage spilling out in a gory mess.

The rest of it disappeared down the throat of the *monster* that stood before her; the purple-scaled beast raised its head back, its all-encompassing shadow growing ever larger as it did, and tossed the lower half of the mustela's corpse into the air before catching it in its jaws, snapping the lion-sized animal up with a snap more akin to the clap of thunder. The sickening sound of bones being crushed like they were mere pretzel sticks sounded from behind its teeth, sending shivers down the poor mouse's spine, followed by a swallow that sounded like the earth shifting. Blood trickled down the sides of its lower jaw, while its fiery orange eyes burned with the dark satisfaction of the kill.

Under normal circumstances, Mrs. Brisby would've either fainted or thrown up from the sight of so much gore, given her weak tolerance for it.

But these circumstances were *far* from normal.

All she could bring herself to do was to stare, mouth agape, in fear…a fear so *ancient*, so ***primal***, so deeply ingrained within her very blood, she might as well be face to face with *Death itself*.

She had heard the stories: the legends from a time long forgotten. The tales that Johnathan had gathered from his journeys across Nimh to bring back and entertain her, and later their furlings with. Stories of great horned serpents that breathed fire, able to burn down entire villages in a single night, guarding unimaginable riches in their lairs deep within the earth. They had always been described the same: as creatures of strength and power beyond anything mortal rodentkin would ever know: larger than even the largest of cats, with hide stronger than the strongest armor, and a breath of fire that burned hotter than even the most ferocious of forest fires.

But to see one in the flesh…to actually gaze upon the size and might of the beast that all too many tales sung of in jest, never truly grasping of what they spoke…

The stories *did not even begin* to do them justice.

This…this was no mere fairy-tale spook made up to scare unruly furlings into behaving, nor was it just another big bad beastie for the heroic knight to simply slay and rescue the princess from. Were it just another giant monster with sharp teeth, it actually would've been better. Still incredibly terrifying, yes, but it would've been far easier to behold.

But there was something far more to this than mere appearance. She could feel it…*literally* feel it: a *presence* about this creature's form. An 'aura' of sorts that radiated from its body, flowing through the air and across the earth like an invisible river rushing across the land, swallowing all within its vicinity into its overwhelming current. She could outright feel this 'presence' against her own body with a very real tangible strength, as if she had been submerged underwater, the sheer pressure of it pushing her down to the ground.

It didn't feel like she was standing in the presence of a large animal. It felt like…like standing before the raging, all-consuming wrath of a massive forest fire.

Within the shadow of the immovable, looming might of a towering mountain.

Struggling to stand against the trembling, earth-splitting destruction of a powerful earthquake.

Cowering in horror at the ever-approaching doom of a horizon-wide tsunami.

And futilely screaming against the furious, over-whelming *roar* of an unstoppable storm.

She now understood why all the animals had fled from the forest: this was no mere 'beast'. This was the very might and wrath of nature itself given life and flesh. A *living force of nature*.

But to all who knew even an *inkling* of the tales of old, it went by a far more familiar name. One that had terrorized beings of all races since the dawn of history itself:

A Dragon.

A giant clawed foot that matched the footprints she had seen before lifted off the ground as the dragon took a four-legged step backwards, turning its massive form around in a matter that reminded her of a wolf or big-cat turning in place. Its footsteps were so heavy that the earth shook under them, thundering through the ground with enough force to make Mrs. Brisby bounce a few inches off of it, a hoarse squeak escaping her throat as she was sent tumbling back, rolling over herself until she laid motionless on her stomach.

However, the building-sized beast seemed to pay her no mind as it turned around to directly face the remaining weasel, who was all but frozen in place with the same deep, primal fear that was outright *crushing* her.

Draconian eyes blazed with a murderous fire as the dragon glared at the intruder with a fury akin to a raging flame, and a deep saurian growl

comparable to an earthquake rumbled from behind bared teeth the size of large swords.

That was all the weasel needed to break out of its stupor of horror. Without hesitation or a single sound, the once-unchallenged predator of the rodent world *bolted* across the riverbed, frantically scrambling back up the cliff-side as if Cama Zotz himself was on its tail.

The dragon merely waited, watching with its unwavering glare, until the intruder was at a desired height.

Then it ***moved.***

As if she knew it was coming, instinct screaming forth from deep within her gut, Mrs. Brisby gripped the ground as if her life depended on it; her twisted ankle burned with protest, but she didn't dare let go.

And it was all that kept her from being blown away like a leaf in a storm: she could feel the very air whoosh past her in a roaring fury, her cloak and skirts whipping wildly in the wind, as the great beast swung its massive tail in an arching spin, tearing it through the air at speeds a creature of that size and mass shouldn't even be able to move at, let alone with such agility.

The weasel didn't have time to react. It barely had the time to look back before the heavy end of the tail completely and utterly *smashed* it like a bug on the wall.

The blow was strong enough to split the very bedrock of the cliff's foundation, the web-like cracks bursting forth with an ear-splitting shatter of breaking stone; it, along with the dozens of long, blade-like dorsal spines that lined it, completely flattened the mammal's fragile body as if it was made of paper, completely obliterating its skeleton. Its limbs went rigid, and its eyes bulged from their sockets, as a geyser of blood and pulped organs erupted from its mouth.

Then it fell limp, hanging lifelessly from where it had been impaled.

With an almost dramatic, albeit barbaric flair, the dragon pulled its tail away and swished it back in a rough whipping motion, flicking off the blood and viscera that clung to its tail-spines. It watched, still glaring with those horrible burning eyes, as the blood-soaked remains slowly slid to the base of the cliff in a fleshy heap, leaving a long smear of red behind it. Several stones broke free from the sight of impact as well, tumbling down the bloodied cliff-face in a dusty clatter.

It gave a fierce, bestial snort of defiance at the remains, bathing the pile of gore with twin streams of smoke from its nostrils. This was followed by a deep, guttural sigh that visibly vibrated the flesh around its throat, a deep exhale escaping from its mouth as it turned its gaze away from its latest victim…

…and back to the poor lost mouse that had stumbled into its domain.

Its steps were outright silent in comparison to how they had thundered before, only creating soft tremors as the dragon slowly approached her. Even in her mind-crippling fear, she couldn't help but think it looked almost like a giant, purple cat, the way it approached her: slowly slinking to the left and right, pausing mid-step every now and then, like a curious cat approaching something of interest. By no means the swift, jerky motions of a lizard or other such reptile…although the way its neck, body and long tail outright *flowed* after its head through the air was *very* serpent-like, like a large snake 'swimming' through the air. It was almost *hypnotic* to watch, like the dance of a cobra readying to strike mixed with a panther stalking its prey through the dark of the jungle.

Mrs. Brisby gave a soft, weak cough as the sheer 'presence' of the dragon grew ever heavier as it came ever closer. Its stare had pinned her to the ground, leaving her unable to do anything but pitifully crawl away on aching limbs.

The beast didn't stop until it was practically standing over her, its mighty form looming over her like a great cliff of immovable stone, before lowering its head slightly; enough to get a closer look, but still keeping distance between itself and its newfound curiosity. She could outright *feel* the vibrations of its breath rumbling from its chest; feel the *huge* bouts of

air being sucked down its throat and into its powerful lungs. It shifted its wings against its sides as it adjusted its balance to stand in place; this simple act of moving its wings was enough to kick up a small torrent of winds, tiny dust-devils dancing across the riverbed. It's breath blew hot as it exhaled, so much so that it felt like she was trapped in the blaze of a raging forest fire, sweat mixing with the blood in her fur.

And its presence? Mrs. Brisby felt like she had been sunk to the very bottom of the ocean, the sheer 'weight' of its magical aura threatening to crush her like a bug.

She wanted nothing more in that moment than to flee. It didn't matter where: anywhere to just get *away*. But her body, already battered and bruised from all that had happened, had given up; her limbs felt as if they were made of lead, and weighed twice as much. Her head swam as if she was being tossed in a stormy sea, still bleeding from the wound on her forehead. She tried to speak…to scream for help…to beg for her life again, but her voice was locked in her throat, leaving her unable to do anything but whimper in short, frantic breaths.

She couldn't move. She couldn't breathe. She could barely even think, for all rational thought, as well as any hope of seeing her family again, had been lost within the flaming gaze of those burning draconian eyes.

In the end, all she could do was curl up into a shaking ball of fur, cover her face with her paws, squeeze her eyes shut, and pray that it would be quick.

But *it* never came.

In fact, nothing happened at all.

And following an intense moment of mind-crippling fear, the presence of the beast *faded*.

It was a very bizarre yet relieving sensation: the overwhelming invisible weight filling the air seemed to almost flow away, like water being drained from a lake, slowly but surely lifting off of her. It was so relieving that her heart began to calm from it, despite knowing full well that her life was still

in grave danger. The intense, fire-like heat of its breath and eyes also faded away into a soft, almost-distant glow of ember; more akin to the gentle warmth of a hearth in winter than a raging, all-consuming forest fire.

It was almost *pleasant*.

Swallowing the large lump in her throat, she dared a peek from behind parted fingers. The dragon was still there. but something had *changed*. The sheer essence of standing before a living force of nature was…*subdued*: it was still there, but it was far, *far* weaker than it was before, hidden behind the veil of simple flesh, bone, and scales. It was now more akin to observing such a phenomenon from a distance: still able to see its great destructive power, but in a place of perceived safety. Didn't make the great winged reptile seem any less gigantic, but it was far easier to behold now.

But its aura wasn't the only thing that changed, and she found herself lowering her hands as she looked upon the second transformation of the beast: its eyes. No longer fiercely-burning balls of hot orange and white, but now soft, glimmering pools of gold and magenta. Even in her fear, Mrs. Brisby couldn't help but realize how beautiful they looked: beautiful in a primal sense, that is, like polished gemstones twinkling in the dark cave.

Gone was the ferocious flaming rage of a wrathful dragon, replaced by a calm, outright-innocent curiosity.

And…*something else*.

Something hidden deep within those glowing eyes.

Something *familiar*.

Mrs. Brisby lowered her paws from her face, clutching them nervously to her chest as she stared at the dragon with a mix of confusion, fear, and maybe even a touch of her own uncertain curiosity. The dragon stared back at her with that same familiar look in its eyes for a few more minutes, its tail slowly swishing back and forth; the bones of its previous meals shifted and clattered under the heavy appendage's movements, some of the smaller ones outright breaking under its weight.

It looked as if it wanted to do something…maybe even to *say something. C*ould it even speak? She knew stories of dragons that spoke, but she didn't know if they were true; Frith knew just about everything else about the old stories felt like fanciful nonsense after witnessing the real thing in the flesh.

But ultimately, whether it could or not, it didn't. Instead, it simply gave a deep, thrumming sigh of an exhale and took a step backwards, shifting its body in place as it turned away from the mouse. It left her laying there, shaken but alive, as it stepped over to the second weasel's body, opening its jaws just enough to pick up the remains of the dead predator. It snapped up the bloodied torso like a crocodile snaps up the flesh of its kill, blood spilling out from between the creature's teeth as it messily ate.

This was her chance. Whatever the reason, this great beast had let her live, and she wasn't going to waste the opportunity to escape.

Her bones cried out in protest as she weakly pushed herself up off the ground, and she almost fell backwards in dizzying pain as she stood up; *everything* hurt, from her ribs to her head to her twisted ankle, the last of which flared from the pressure, making her gasp in a hissing breath as she leaned on her good foot to relieve the pain.

The dragon paused at her voice, its gem-like eye glancing back at her for a brief moment, before it returned to silently consuming its latest kill...as silent as breaking bones and ripping flesh could be, that is.

Mrs. Brisby took slow, limping steps backwards, not taking her eyes off the dragon for even a second; her bad leg continued to protest being used, a hot stabbing pain shooting through it with each step, but even then, she didn't dare look away. She wasn't even sure if she even blinked as she slowly but surely put distance between herself and the beast. However, said beast simply ignored her from that point on, outright deliberately so.

It was as if it was pretending to not notice her, so that she felt brave enough to try to leave…as if it was willingly letting her go.

The timid, trembling doe took another step back…then one more…and then finally turned away and bolted for the cliff as fast as her wounds would

allow her, scrambling across the ground on all four of her paws.

It was one thing to climb up the side of a cliff in the first place; to do so having just taken a long, painful fall off of it was another thing entirely. The large web of roots and vines running down its cliff-face made for the perfect ladders for the tiny mouse to scramble up, scaling the network of plants as easily as any normal rodent would climb, but her aching bones, combined with her natural fear of heights (which was already screaming within her from her last fall), only made what would otherwise be a relatively easy feat a truly harrowing one.

She paused every now and then to catch her pained breath and rest her sore body, laying against the root she was climbing with her claws digging into its side for dear life; she had to fight not to look down, for she if she did, she would not be able to take another step. She had already nearly killed herself the first time she had foolishly leapt off this very cliff, and she knew several of her bones were bruised, if not broken, already. It was a miracle she had survived in the first place.

If she were to fall a second time…she wasn't going to be so fortunate.

She was a little more than halfway up when she paused again, this time to see what the dragon was doing. The winged beast hadn't moved from where it was eating the remains of the weasels, having finished the first and already devouring the bottom half. But it had her in its sights none-the-less; even as it ate, in the same manner a wolf would devour a small rabbit, its eye was watching her out of the corner of its socket. The scaled, reptilian face was unreadable, as stoic and expressionless as the face of a snake or lizard, but there was that same glow of something in its eyes.

Something that she still couldn't recognize…yet felt so *familiar*.

She had *seen* that look before. She *knew* what it was. But be it out of her own emotional turmoil or it being in eyes so reptilian, she *just couldn't figure out what*. It was starting to frustrate her as much as it scared her.

What *was* it about those eyes that was so…*pulling*?

Mrs. Brisby pushed these thoughts away as she continued her climb; she could still feel that glimmering gaze of fire against her back, no matter how hard she tried to ignore it and focus. And the higher she got, the longer time passed without any form of harm or ill-will, she found herself continuing to glance back at the creature pretending not to watch her in turn: whenever it saw her looking back, it turned its gaze away, pretending to focus on its food, only to sneak a quick glance every now and then, as if waiting for her to turn away so it could watch her again.

That actually made a small, silent bubble of a giggle escape her lips as she turned to climb up the last root.

It was just above her now; the top of the same 'hill' that she had so foolishly leapt off of, hanging out over the cliff-face in a jutting precipice. The log she had jumped out of loomed over the edge to her left, and she found herself shivering at the idea of going anywhere near it again. The edge was jutting out over the cliff-face she had been climbing, leaving her standing on one of the roots that hung underneath it. The only way up from here was a number of vines that hung in the air from the precipice.

Dangling over the abyss she already fallen into below.

She took a big, audible gulp as she swallowed the bloody bile in her throat, failing to steady her nerves as her shaking hands grabbed the vines, her grip so tight that her knuckles turned white beneath her fur. She closed her eyes and began breathing softly, trying to ignore the sheer wave of vertigo that assaulted her senses as she inched toward the edge of the root, fighting to reassure herself of the last stretch.

'It's just a quick, short climb up.' She told herself. *'No more than ten feet.. you can do this…for Timmy. Do it for Timmy.'*

Timmy…her son. One of her children. Her *beautiful* children, whom, for a split second of complete, mind-consuming terror, she had thought she would never see again.

But she *was* going to see them again. She *was going home.*

Taking one final, hitching breath, she squeezed her eyes shut and took that one brave step of faith, hopping over the root and clinging to the vine as tightly as she could with all four paws. A jolting pain shot up through her ankle, but she fought through it, holding on with all her might. She hung there, eyes clenched shut, as she waited for the vines to come loose or snap…but when neither happened, she couldn't stop the deep sigh of relief from escaping her lips; the vines were taught under her weight (as little as that was), but were holding fast. She began shimmying up the green rope-like plants. Her bad ankle made it a slow and painful process, the twisted muscle and tendons crying out in anguish with every jerking pull; her eyes began watering from the pain, and she wanted nothing more than to stop and rest, but she couldn't afford to rest now.

The edge was now only a few more feet…home was so close, she had to keep going…just a little further…

A chocolate-milk-brown paw reached over the edge and grabbed a fistful of grass.

A wave of elation flowed through her heart, and she felt as if she was going to cry from sheer happiness. She had made it! She had escaped the jaws of death from the weasels. She had survived a fall into a mass graveyard. She had stared a living ***dragon*** in the eyes and came out alive. And she *climbed a cliff* to escape it all.

She let go of the vines with her other paw and grabbed another fistful of grass. As she struggled to pull herself up, she wondered if Johnathan would've been proud of her. If he could see his wife being as brave as he wa-.

The vine she was still holding onto with her hind-paws ripped free of the ground and plummeted out from under her, leaving her feet with nothing to support her weight.

All relief instantly fled as her legs lost all footing, leaving them and her lower body dangling in the open air, only being held by the grass she was now holding onto with all her strength. She dug her chin into the soil of the precipice, *desperately* trying to gain *any* kind of hold. She kicked at the air

frantically, clawing desperately at where her mind's eye was telling her the cliff was, but even stretching her legs granted no traction, leaving her swinging back and forth in the air. Small chunks of dirt began to crumble where she clung, the weak soil giving way around her struggling form.

Then, with a wave of complete and utter horror overtaking her heart, she saw the soil around her hands begin to crumble as well, the grass she clung to so tightly starting to tear free from the earth.

"No! Please no!" She croaked desperately, releasing one grip to try clawing at the ground itself.

All this accomplished was her losing her grasp and slipping down. She was now hanging by one paw, still clinging desperately to the edge, the rest of her flailing in the air in blind, mind-consuming panic. Her bruised ribs screamed in agony as her weight pulled her arm, her head ringing from the sheer pain coursing through her body, yet she didn't dare let go.

"HELP!" She screamed in absolute desperation, her body flailing in the air. "Somebody! *Anybody! PLEASE! I NEED HELP!"*

Heavy tears flowed from wide, terror-filled eyes as she felt her life-line began to crumble. *"Dear Frith, P-Please! I-I don't want to die!"*

One…chunk…at…a…time.

The edge she clung to gave way. And Elizabeth Brisby, the widow of Johnathan Brisby and soon-to-be deceased mother of four orphans, fell from the edge of the river's cliff once again.

It was a strange sensation: to see your life flash before your eyes for a *second* time in one day. To feel time slow to a crawl as an entire story's worth of events flash through her sight *again*. Her life. Her home. Her family. All of it, just as bright and as beautiful as it had before…but somehow, the fear and pain were even greater this time. This time, it wasn't a predator or other outside force that was going to take her away from her children…

Her precious children…she had *failed them*.

It was her fault this time; for being too weak and too foolish to even get back home! Had she been paying attention in the first place, instead of letting her mind's rampant worry distract her from the dangers of the world, then this never would've happened.

She wouldn't be falling to her death. She wouldn't be leaving her children parent-less orphans. And she wouldn't be leaving poor Timothy to die of pneumonia.

Sorrow. Misery. Loss. Sickness. And Death. That's all that awaited them now.

And it was *all her fault*.

The winds began to pick up as she felt time began to rush back to its normal pace once more, along with the wind rushing through her clothes and fur as she began to fall. She closed her eyes tightly, bracing herself for death.

Only to stop a mere second after she lost her grip, landing on something solid yet warm, breaking her fall just as it begun.

Without even thinking, she grabbed onto and instinctively clung to this sudden surface as if her *very salvation* depended on it. Her breath came in quick, sobbing gasps as she lay on her stomach, shaking like a leaf as she wept hysterically in shock, clinging desperately to the rough, almost stone-like formation she found herself on. Her mind was going a thousand miles a second, trying to comprehend what had just happened.

Both the fact she was about to fall to her death, and that she had been stopped…no…*saved* by something that hadn't been there a mere second ago.

When the realization came to her, she found that she could've cheered with sheer joy then and there.

She was alive…*Frith above, she was alive*!

A gasping sob of elation escaped her lips as she outright hugged the rock she was clinging to, the tears that had been of terror now those of gratitude as she snuggled against what had caught her.

What had caught her, she realized.

This wasn't stone.

That's when she opened her eyes, only to see straight through the windows into the soul of the beast.

It was the Dragon: she was currently laying atop his snout, resting on the bridge of bone between his nostrils and his eye-ridges, leaving her clinging to the right side of the scaly face...at an angle that allowed her to stare *directly* into that great, draconian eye that was half her size. She was so close to it she could see her own wide-eyed expression staring back at her within the depths of glowing gold and purple, and deep within the fathomless depths of that slit, reptilian pupil.

If she thought the gaze of the dragon was powerful before, then it was *nothing* compared to staring directly into its very soul. Even though its presence was still subdued, she could see within those eyes. The great, roiling power of fire, earth, wind, and other mighty elemental forces, flowing deeply within the depths, just waiting to be unleashed upon the world. The unflinching stare of an immortal, with absolutely no fear of death, for it was not an inevitability for his kind, but rather just a possibility.

She could *see* a primal strength, power, ferocity, wisdom and magnificence so ancient and prehistoric that no modern-day creature could *even begin* to compare. She could see-

Confusion. *Worry. Pain.*

Fear.

Everything else seemed to fade around them both when she saw it, the fear of the great, terrible dragon fading away, as did the shock of nearly losing

her life. The eye she was looking into was wide and full of emotion she could now clearly see: Fear.

But not for himself. She honestly doubted there was anything on this planet he would actually fear as a threat to his life. No. This wasn't a fear *of* something…but *for* something. A kind she herself had felt that very morning: when she watched her son lie bed-ridden with fever, and the very same that drove her to seek out aid from Mr. Ages in the first place:

The fear of losing someone you care about.

And he, the mighty dragon, was feeling that fear *for her.*

She thought it had just been a happy accident. A mere coincidence that this dragon killed the weasels right before they were going to kill her. A stroke of luck that the beast then decided her small amount of meat wasn't worth the energy it would've taken to catch her. Frith shining his mercy upon her and sweeping her away from the jaws of a *monster*.

Except…this *wasn't* a monster. And it *hadn't* been an accident at all.

This dragon...the legendary beast of fire, greed, death, and destruction…the greatest, most dangerous, and most feared of all the world's fantastical creatures…*had saved her life*.

Twice.

She felt him give a deep, rumbling sigh of relief, the vibrations of the air rushing through his mouth thrumming beneath her as the fearful worry melted away from his eyes, looking at her once more with that same gaze as before: the outright-innocent stare of a creature that meant no harm, along with that mixed-in emotion from before hidden within it. The one she *knew*, but couldn't recognize before.

But now, literally face to face with the window to the soul, it was clear as day, no longer able to hide behind the fiery glow of draconian wrath. And impossible to mistake for anything else:

Resigned Sorrow**.**

The kind someone *held* when they lost something very important to them and knew they would never get it back; of someone who had no choice but to accept a lifetime of sorrow and emptiness, forever carrying a painful hole in their heart that would never again be filled. And even though they could see what they had lost in the world around them, in the lives of those whose hearts were still whole, they knew it would never be theirs again, if was even theirs to begin with.

A sorrow she also knew all too well.

She barely noticed when the dragon began to move, carrying her with him; with slow, careful strides he stepped up to the edge of the cliff and began to climb up the side of it. His movements were slow and reptilian, with very precise placing of his hands and feet, scaling the steep surface like a massive lizard. When he reached the top of the cliff, his hands gripping the edge, he extended his neck out as far away from the edge as he could reach, lowering his chin to the ground and tilting his head forward, allowing the mouse clinging to him to gently slide off.

Mrs. Brisby didn't take her eyes off the dragon's own the entire time, slowly sliding off the reptilian snout with not a sound. Her paws finally found their footing on solid earth, far from the danger of heights and predators alike; only then did she let go, taking a small, ginger step backwards as the beast's massive head pulled back to a resting position above his body. The two then stared at each other in silence, the only sound being the dragon's deep, guttural breathing.

The mightiest of all creatures and the meekest of them. Two complete opposites of the food chain. One who ruled without challenge and the other who lived in the shadows of giants.

But for a brief moment, one precious moment of shared hardship and sadness, they were the same.

"*Thank you*." Mrs. Brisby finally managed to whisper, just loud enough for her savoir to hear.

His reaction to her thanks, however, was anything than expected.

The dragon recoiled a bit, visibly taken aback. Not out of insult, but out of surprise, as if gratitude for its actions was the very last thing it expected. While its reptilian face still held little expression, the mix of shock, confusion, and even hurt were clear in his widened eyes, the pupils actually rounding a bit with emotion. He stared at her, silent and unmoving, as if physically unable to comprehend what he had just heard, all the while the storm of emotions continue to roll within those eyes.

Those sad, *confused*, ***longing*** eyes.

He suddenly shuddered, shaking himself out of his stupor with a frustrated snort, his pupils snapping back to perfectly-thin slits with a quick blink. With another rumbling thrum, the beast pushed itself off the cliff-face in a light jump, landing back down on all fours with a heavy thud. He gave her a stern look before turning away, stepping through the river of bones until it reached the other side. Looking up to the precipice above him, he tucked all four legs together in a very cat-like manner before giving a quick leap up to the opposite shore, clearing the entire cliff in a single bound. His wings flapped against his sides as he steadied his landing, his long tail sliding up and over the edge like a large purple snake, causing a small cascade of dirt and stone to fall behind him.

He turned his head back to give her one last look from across the dried river, their eyes meeting again for another brief moment.

Then he looked away and disappeared into the forest, slipping in between the bushes and trees; she watched in silence as the last of that long tail slithered into the undergrowth.

And she was once again alone.

She blinked as an unexpected hotness pricked behind her eyes. She raised her paw to wipe at the unexpected tears that began to run down her cheeks, wiping a bit of the blood on her face off in the process. She stared at her wet fingers, confusion filling her head…just as a new kind of tight sadness began filling her heart.

She frowned in confusion, even as a soft sob escaped her throat.

What *was* this? Why was she feeling so *sad* all of a sudden?

…and why was world suddenly upside down?

She stumbled in place, blinking heavily as her head began to spin. At long last, with all the scares, pain, danger, and several brushes with death behind her, she was safe. And with that realization, the heavy amount of adrenaline rushing through her veins finally began to die down: *Literally* the only thing keeping her awake at this point was leaving her body, and with it the true extent of her injuries came rushing to replace it. The several bruised ribs, the twisted ankle, the blow to her head, and Frith knows how much blood she had lost through it all.

She rested a weary paw to her forehead, taking a shaky breath as she slumped to the ground, gripping a nearby flower desperately with ever-weakening paws. Everything was spinning round and round, her head feeling lighter with every passing second, and she could feel the strength draining out of her.

She tried to fight it, struggling just to keep her eyes open. To stay awake.

She had to get home…she had to get Timmy his medicine…*she had to*…

But for all her willpower, her body had reached its limit, and the battered, bloodied mouse finally caved into her exhaustion. She slid down her support until she laid across the ground, curling up into a vulnerable damsel position, resting her head against the flower she dragged down with her. The blood from her forehead trickled onto it, turning the white petals red.

As her vision began to grow dark, her eyelids growing heavy with sleep, she saw a bright yellow light approaching her, accompanied by the sound of large insect wings fluttering in flight.

And just as her mind slipped into the merciful embrace of unconsciousness, she thought she heard a feminine voice sigh in exasperated frustration.

Chapter 10: Recovery, Recollections, and Realization

Chapter Text

Ache.

That was the first thing Mrs. Brisby felt as she roused from slumber, and the best way to describe how she felt: just…*ache*. Everything, all over, *ached*. From her bones to her muscles, from her head to her ankle, everything felt like it was straining under the weight of a boulder. A pained whine escaped her lips as she shifted in bed; an action she instantly regretted as that just aggravated her soreness, leaving her winching in place. Now her only goal was to remain as still as possible, wanting nothing more than to go back to the blissful, painless sleep she had awoken from.

She laid as still as she could, resting her heavy head against her pillow of leaves as she tried not to agitate anything.

That was, until she remembered: she didn't have a pillow of *leaves*.

This wasn't her bed.

Her eyes snapped open at that realization; another action she instantly regretted as a hot light stabbed into her pupils, sending another bout of agony through her skull, one that had her groaning in regret. She quickly clasped her paws over her face, gritting her teeth as she sucked in a breath, ignoring the soreness of her limbs in favor of soothing her eyes.

However, instead of the pads of her palms, she felt the touch of thick cloth against her face.

Confused, she pulled her hands away and opened her eyes again, this time slowly, easing them into the light; her vision was blurry at first, but with a few solid blinks it came back into focus: the two blobs of white that filled her vision cleared to reveal her paws, completely bandaged in gauze, making it look like she was wearing white mittens.

As her senses came to, she realized that wasn't the only cloth she felt; she could feel more wrapped around her head, and she looked up to see more white gauze at the very edge of her peripheral vision.

She reached up to inspect it, unable to feel it against her fingers thanks to the wrapping around her hand, but able to feel it shift against her forehead. It remained stuck against where she had hurt herself, though. A sticky substance had been spread over the wound before being bandaged up; most likely medicinal ointment, if the smell of herbs that lingered in the air and clung to her hands was anything to judge by.

Someone had tended to her wounds while she was unconscious.

…her wounds.

It slowly started coming back in a slow but steady of images, sounds, and emotions: her trip to Mr. Ages, learning that Timothy had pneumonia and of the new Titan Beast, going off the main path to avoid the footprints, the two weasels that chased her through the forest, her foolish blind leap and fall into a dried river…then it was a blur of fog after that.

She could feel *something* pushing against her skull…something else she was *supposed* to remember…but for the life of her, she couldn't.

She couldn't remember anything past the painful fall, and given how much her head currently ached, it wasn't hard to imagine why: she must've hit her head at least three times tumbling down the riverbed. She hissed in pain as the memories only made said headache even worse, and she rubbed her paw tenderly against her throbbing skull.

Perhaps it would be best to wait until later to recall anything else…

…so where was she now?

Moving very slowly and gingerly so she wouldn't agitate her body any further than needed, she managed to sit up in the makeshift bed she realized she was in. Though it was a bed in the most primitive idea of the concept: made of patches of cotton stuffed into an old quail's nest, with a large leaf

wrapped over the top. A second leaf had been draped over her as a blanket, which slid down her front around her hips as she sat up, with several more leaves had been gathered in a pile to serve as a very bare-bones pillow. It was looked like something out of Nimh's past, straight from the burrow of prehistoric cave mice.

Her surroundings only complimented the bare-bone living conditions of her rescuer. She was in a large burrow, but not one dug out by paw: rather it was formed under a great tree, the large snaking roots making the perfect natural ceiling to hold the earth in place. It looked like it was an abandoned El-ahrian burrow, easily large enough to house several rabbits, the root-lined ceiling high above her. A small campfire had been made close by, casting a dim but warm light against her and the wall the nest-bed was near. A large, flat rock sat next to the nest, upon which several items were placed: several clay bowls of medicinal paste, folded wraps of gauze material, a couple medical tools made of a strange green crystal instead of metal, all laid out on a shawl made of leaves which had been laid out across the rock, while her dress and clo-

Wait.

Mrs. Brisby did a double-take, her eyes widening comically at the sight of her own dress draped over the end of the rock, alongside her cloak hanging on a jutted point of stone.

And she only needed one quick look down to confirm it; she gave an alarmed squeak as she grabbed the blanket leaf, frantically pulling it up over her bare chest as a heavy blush erupted across her face, visible through her fur.

She sat there, red as a tomato, burning with embarrassment for a good minute or so, before she took a quick peak under the blanket to see what had been done to her. She saw another binding of gauze wrapped around her torso, tightly bound and doubled-up in layers around her midsection under her breasts. Whoever had removed her clothes had done so to tend to her bruised ribs, having wrapped the bandages around her like a corset, in a way that prevented her from bending her spine too much so that her injuries could heal properly.

She blinked in surprise as that realization came right after the first; someone had found her unconscious, carried her to safety and tended to her injuries. But who…?

"About time you decided to wake up."

Her question was ultimately answered by the sudden voice, which caused the poor mouse to jump in startled fright. Instinctively clutching her blanket over herself, she looked up to the entrance of the burrow, which was across the fire pit from the bed she was in. The owner of the voice pushed the portiere made of leaves woven together with vines aside with a single, furless hand, a bright glow illuminating the darkened burrow as they entered.

A glow that emanated from the being's very body.

Mrs. Brisby's eyes widen at the sight of the winged humanoid that stepped into the den, the portiere falling back into place behind them. It was a fairy…an *actual fairy*, one of the mysterious Fair Folk of the equally-mysterious Feywild Forest. Johnathan had told her many stories of the magical forest people of north-western Nimh and his encounters with them during his travels, but she had never imagined seeing one in the flesh herself.

Mostly because they weren't exactly on friendly terms with the Rodentkin; the relationship between the two races could best be described as 'uneasy' at *best*. Despite the praise her late husband had spoken of a few individuals he personally knew, he also had made it *very* clear that they were not to be approached: he described them as a very reclusive and aloof bunch, always keeping to themselves in their forest…especially for the past half-century or so, when they suddenly closed their borders *completely* to the outside world, forcing all Rodentkin who even attempted to enter their lands away. By *blade*, if necessary.

So why was this one…?

Without a word, the fairy took a seat next to the foot of the bed, on a rock right next to the larger one where all the tools (and Mrs. Brisby's dress) had

been laid out. Without taking her eyes off her 'patient', the winged girl picked up the crystal scissors with the pinky finger of her right hand.

"Show me your leg." She finally spoke, motioning to said legs hidden under the blanket.

That caught the mouse off-guard, her eyes going wide. "E-Excuse me?"

The fairy gave her a look that could only be described as exasperation incarnate, thoroughly done with the world and its nonsense. "So I can finish bandaging your ankle, you *nitwit*."

"O-O-Oh…" The doe squeaked, pulling her blanket up to cover her face, which was now flushed an even deeper shade of red.

Her annoyed host only gave an exasperated sigh, rolling her eyes as she reached down and lifted the leaf up off the mouse's bare legs, folding it up so it still covered her lap. Peeking over the rim of her leaf, Mrs. Brisby saw that her right leg had been wrapped in a rudimentary splint: a wrapping of gauze around her ankle, and two straight sticks bound with small vines to her upper shin and 'foot' of her paw, forcing the ankle straight and still so that the pulled tendons could heal without being disturbed. It was rather primitive, but none the less effective, as she found that she couldn't bend her ankle at all…not that she tried to, given how sore it was just resting there. A few loose feet of gauze hung from the end of the wrapping near her toes, waiting to be tied off.

"I don't even know why Rodentkin have a nudity taboo to begin with." The fairy said as she worked, leaving her tool to hang from her hooked pinky as she wrapped the last bit of gauze through the sticks and around Mrs. Brisby's foot. "You're all covered in fur. Nothing indecent is exposed." She tied off the last straps, taking care not to tie them too tightly. "The El-ahrians and the Nocturnals don't wear clothing and they get along just fine…well, in the Nocturnals case, they *can't* wear clothing, given their wings and all."

"You have wings." Brisby stated softly, catching herself off guard with her own words. She raised her paw to her lips, eyes widening in surprise; they

had slipped out so casually that she didn't even register them until they were spoken.

The fairy only smirked, though, a small glimmer of amusement flashing in those turquoise eyes.

"And they make it a pain in the ass to get dressed *every* time." She quipped with a dry laugh as she finished tying the binds; with an impressive dance of fingers, she spun the scissors around in her palm a few times before slipping them right into place in her grasp, snipping them twice for good measure. She moved so fast that by the time Mrs. Brisby could flinch, the spare lengths of gauze had been snipped off.

"There." the brown-haired girl said, leaning back and putting the cutting tool back on the rock with the rest. "That should keep it good until you can get it properly tended. But even then, you're gonna want to stay off that foot for the next couple of days."

Mrs. Brisby opened her mouth to say something but was cut off by the rabbit-hide waterskin that was suddenly shoved in front of her nose. "Here. You'll probably want to replace all the fluid you lost too."

Whatever the mouse intended to say was quickly forgotten as she became strongly aware of how dry her mouth was; the telltale sloshing of water was almost hypnotizing, her parched throat aching for its life-given content. She instinctively licked the back of her teeth as she took the waterskin in her bandaged paws, barely noticing their soreness as she brought the amber valve up to her lips.

Still a bit wary that this could be a fairy trick, she took a small sip…

…and then promptly threw caution (and manners) to the wind and began downing the entire thing in large, audible gulps, so fast that water tricked down the sides of her mouth and dripped from her chin. The fairy cocked at eyebrow, mildly impressed and greatly amused by the unflattering display.

"Where does it all go in such a small body?" She mused aloud as she watched her guest lean back and finish the waterskin in a single go.

Mrs. Brisby gasped for breath as she flopped forward, dropping the empty skin into her lap. She sat there, using her arms to keep herself steady as she wobbled in place; part of her felt like she was going to pass out from lack of oxygen, while another part of her felt fit to burst, her belly slightly extended from how much water she drank.

But after a few minutes of steady breathing, she regained her sense of balance, along with the realization of how silly she must've looked; blushing softly, she used the leaf to wipe the water from her chin, trying not to meet the fairy's amused stare.

"T-…T-Thank you." She murmured softly as she handed the waterskin back to her rescuer, glancing up with shy yet grateful eyes.

The fairy merely 'hmmed' in acknowledgement as she took the skin and turned to the table, gathering the tools and skin into a single pile before wrapping the green shawl around them. She then stood up and turned away from the mouse and raised one hand, running her fingers down through the air in front of her, as if sliding them down an invisible windowpane…which began to glow with a purple-blue light.

There, before the mouse's awed eyes, the very air *split in half*: as if said invisible window opened to the world beyond, a glimmering tear materialized in the air. A sharp crackling akin to the electricity of Mr. Age's machines along with a soft twinkling akin to a hundred tiny wind chimes filled the burrow, caused by the glowing oval of sparkling purple-blue energy that lined the edges of the tear, whipping about like tongues of an open flame. Within the oval was a dark void of nothingness; a space that led to the infinite abyss on the other side of reality.

Mrs. Brisby's eyes widened in surprise, though not out of seeing the magic itself…in fact, she *knew* this spell. She had seen it before.

She had seen King Nicodemus use his magic to make a hole in the air just like it, during her brief time in Rosebush City. Nicodemus was a powerful sorcerer, one of the only rats in all of Nimh that could use the more powerful magics…but he was also *very* old, his body weak from his age. So he used magic to get things that were otherwise out of reach from wherever

he was resting: she remembered seeing him use this exact same spell of making a hole in the air to retrieve items that were otherwise out of reach; he once used it to get her a pastry all the way from the royal kitchen, which was located on the other side of the castle.

It had been the first time she had ever seen magic, and the first time she had tasted the wonder of baked goods, thus she remembered it fondly.

The fairy said nothing as she continued 'opening' the portal until it was at the desired size, roughly the same as a small cupboard door. Then, as if simply putting something away, she lifted the shawl and pushed it inside; the green cloth and its contents inside appeared to dissolve entirely into the same purple-blue magic as it completely disappeared into the void, as if erased from existence itself. Once fully inside, she placed her fingers at the base of the tear and repeated the motion in reverse: like a zipper being sealed from the bottom-up, her fingers sealed the portal closed from the base to the top, leaving a single line of magical energy hanging mid-air.

Then, as if simply shooing a fly away, she waved her hand through it: the energy burst and scattered into the air in a cloud of sparkling dust, like common dust being blown off a surface, twinkling away into nothingness and leaving nothing behind. As if the tools that had been used to heal her had never existed.

As if the act of opening a door between the very realms themselves had never occurred.

Mrs. Brisby sat there in silence, staring at the spot where the hole had once been; even if she had seen it before, it was still an impressive sight to behold.

And one she didn't see very often. Most Rodentkin didn't have a very strong affinity for magic, not being as naturally-magical as Fae or other such Magic Born. Nicodemus was, by far, the most skilled magic-caster in all Ratdom, but that was thanks to his age and experience. Apart from him, only a few court wizards and a select few of the royal family could use true magic, thanks to their access to the royal library's small collection of arcane knowledge, but they were nowhere near as skilled as their king. Other than

them, the only 'magicians' that really existed in the rodent-lands were traveling street performers who occasionally knew a cheap spell or two, most of their so-called skills being nothing more than cheap tricks of illusion.

Johnathan had told her that a long time ago, and with no short disdain for the fact in his voice.

But this fairy didn't look or act like royalty of any kind, and that spell was far too real to be anything of an illusionist's work. Yet she wielded it as if it was just a common act of everyday use, no more difficult than using a common household tool. Was she a skilled sorceress of her people? Or were the Fair Folk so magical that using such powerful spells was just commonplace for their kind?

The latter would explain the overall feelings of fear and mistrust Rodentkin held for the people of the forest.

There was another moment of silence before she spoke again, finally asking the question she wanted to from the start: "Who are you?"

And the answer she got was as short and simple as possible: "Zoe."

Mrs. Brisby blinked; that was a *far* simpler name than she was expecting for a fairy, outright *plain* compared to most magical names she had heard before…and most rat and mouse names she had heard before too. It was almost cute, she thought to herself.

Well, one greeting begot another, she decided. "I'm-"

"*Stupid* and reckless to the point of outright defying the laws of natural selection." Zoe interrupted her as she turned back to glare at her ‘patient’, her displeasure shown in both her face and her voice, making Mrs. Brisby flinch at her words. The winged woman retook her seat next to the bed, crossing her legs together in a very unladylike manner and folding her arms. "Let's start with the outright-*painfully* obvious: *what* in the name of *the Hollow* are you doing *this* far off the main path and in known predator grounds in the first place?! You nearly got yourself killed *twice* today!"

"I-I was trying to avoid the new Titan Beast!" Mrs. Brisby stammered, trying to explain even though she herself felt the foolishness of her actions. "Mr. Ages told me that a new one had come to these woods, and when I saw the footprints across the path, I panicked at the idea of it being so close to my home-!"

"And you became so focused on the big new threat that you forgot all the smaller ones that already lurk in the forest." Zoe finished for her.

The doe paused at those words, before ultimately nodding in silence, shame filling her heart. Satisfied, the fairy unfolded her arms and placed her hands in her lap, her face becoming one of light yet genuine concern. "You're *unbelievably* fortunate to be alive right now, especially considering how deep in the wild lands you live." She shook her head in disbelief at it all. "Titan Beasts are by no means the only predators to exist in these parts, especially towards creatures as small as mice. Predators you *knew* were out there but forgot to acknowledge out of blind fear…and because of that, your children almost lost their *mother* today…*twice*."

Poor Mrs. Brisby seemed to shrink in shame at the scolding, the weight of her actions only growing heavier, as was her gratitude for her unexpected savior.

"Thank you.…thank you *so much."* She hiccupped, struggling not to cry from the sheer whirlwind of emotions in her, eyes gleaming with gratitude. "You stopped that from happening, and I can never-"

"Not me you should thank." Zoe interrupted, holding a hand up to cut her off. "I'm not the one who slew the weasels, nor the one who caught you when you fell: only the one that found you passed out and patched you up *after* the fact."

…

That was right…

This Zoe wasn't the one who had saved her from the weasels…or have saved her from *falling off the cliff.*…

*…Or the reason the river**bed was a massive graveya-***

THE IMMOVABLE WALL OF AMETHYST-COLORED SCALES THAT TOWERED OVER HER MINUSCULE FORM.

The memories slashed through the fog of her mind like a blade through flesh, her heart seizing in her chest as the images filled her mind.

MASSIVE WINGS THAT ENCOMPASSED THE VERY SKY. AN ENDLESS TAIL THAT SHATTERED A ROCK FACE WITH A SINGLE BLOW.

She writhed in place, clutching her head and gasping for breath as her very soul was assaulted by the sensation of her confrontation in the River of Bones.

A DEADLY CROWN OF HORNS ATOP A DRACONIC HEAD, WITH JAWS POWERFUL ENOUGH TO RIP A FULL-GROWN WEASEL IN HALF WITH A SINGLE BITE.

She began to hyperventilate and thrash in bed, her heart beating so fast and hard it felt like it was going to burst. She was grasping the leaves beneath her so hard that her knuckles turned white. She didn't even notice Zoe trying to get her attention, her own face a mix of worry and confusion. She couldn't notice anything.

THE PRESENCE OF THE VERY PLANET ITSELF PRESSING DOWN ON HER, THREATENING TO CRUSH HER LIKE THE MERE, INSIGNIFICANT BUG SHE WAS. THAT* ALL OF NIMH *WAS!

Her every exhale was now a scream of pure, primal fear; the kind one could only feel when confronted with the end of their entire world. She couldn't even hear Zoe shouting at her at this point; she could only lay there, kicking her legs and shaking her head violently, eyes squeezed shut, as she continued to *wail* in utter terror of those resurfacing memories.

THE BURNING RAGE OF PRIMAL FURY WITHIN THOSE FLAMING EYES!

They were all going to die! Timothy, Teresa, Martin, Cynthia, Auntie Shrew, Mr. Ages, Justin, *Everyone*! Every mouse, rat, and all the other creatures of Nimh! They were all going to die! By the jaws or the flames of a force of nature given flesh, flame, and a thirst for blood: A *Dragon*! Nothing else but utter death and destruction for everything could be promised with the all-consuming wrath of those eyes! Those *horrible, **monstrous, BURNING-!***

Sorrow.

Her eyes opened and she wrenched back with a heavy gasp, that one memory piercing through all the others, making her freeze and fall still on the spot. She stared at the ceiling, holding a paw over her heart, as that one little memory washed all the others away, snuffing out the fear like water washing over open flame as she remembered its eyes.

Those eyes: as beautiful as they were terrifying, evoking a sense of primal magnificence. They were the eyes of a true beast: those that were neither of animal nor of man, but something else entirely. Something ancient and unknown. And yet, even in the burning glare of the very embodiment of destruction and death…she had seen it, hidden deep within those eyes… those horrible…monstrous…*sorrowful* eyes. Eyes that could no longer recognize the world that it once knew and loved, no matter how hard they tried to.

Eyes that she knew all too well: that she saw every time she looked upon her own reflection.

Mrs. Brisby didn't say anything; she just lay in the bed, her fur wet from sweat. But soon enough, her heart slowly calmed down, allowing her to take a much-needed breath of relief, resting her head back on her pillow. She began to regret having gone into a panic as her wounds began to flare up again, especially in her bones and her ankle.

But even then, as it all faded back to a steady calm, she was still mentally reeling from encountering a legend in the flesh:

A *Dragon*. Not a giant, scarred cat that merely bore the name, but a genuine, fire-breathing, treasure-hoarding, *Honest-to-Frith* ***Dragon***! Straight out of the ancient stories of old and the fairytales read to furlings at bedtime, here in Nimh!

A hundred questions flooded her mind at once: where did it come from? How did it get here? Did anybody else beside her and this Zoe fairy even know of it? Was Mr. Ages aware of the-

She perked up with realization as the pieces clicked into place: Mr. Ages! The footprints he had been studying, the animals fleeing the forest, the sense of unease she had felt during her travels…it had all been this dragon: *it* was the new Titan Beast that Mr. Ages had been searching for!

The 'monstrous new Titan Beast' was the very one that saved her life *twice* that day.

There weren't enough words in the world to describe the pure elation that flooded the mouse's chest, gasping giggles bubbling from her throat as she nearly wept from sheer, outright *euphoric* relief: this creature openly showed it meant her and her family no harm from the very start. There was never any danger of losing her home or her furlings to begin with. All of her worries about finding a new home, leaving the Lee of the Stone, all of it…it had all been for *nothing*.

Which, in turn, also meant that her decision to journey off the main path, running straight into the jaws of predators, and nearly reuniting with her husband two times in one day had *also* all been for nothing.

She would look back on this one day and want to smash her head against the wall out of sheer frustration.

But for now? She was just too happy to care.

She *wasn't* going to lose her beloved home.

"Damn…" Zoe let out a relieved breath with that word, placing a hand over her own chest as she slumped back in her seat. "I knew your reaction to Dragonfear was gonna be rough, but even *I* didn't think it was gonna be *that* intense. Just…*wow*." She gave a half-hearted chuckle, trying to make light of the situation. "Guess he left quite the first impression, huh?"

Mrs. Brisby didn't say anything; she simply basked in the euphoric bliss of her relief, allowing herself to relax for the first time since this morning.

…*this morning*.

She sat up in bed, looking towards the entrance to the burrow; the light shining through it was a dimmer golden-orange color, and shining in at an angle.

"W-Wait…w-what time is it?" she asked, worry once again filling her heart.

"Late afternoon, just about evening." Zoe told her nonchalantly, motioning to the light a nod of her head. "You've been unconscious for about four hours."

The mouse nearly choked on her own squeak. "Four *hours*?!"I-I have to get back!"

Before Zoe could even object, Mrs. Brisby had thrown her leaf-blanket off her naked body and tried to force herself out of the bed. An action she instantly regretted as her ribs and ankle burned in protest at being moved; her head swam from the pain and she nearly fell backwards into the wall, had the fairy not caught her before she did.

"Out of the question, you're in *no* condition to be going anywhere!" Zoe objected firmly as she held her in place by the shoulders, preventing her from getting out of bed. "I told you: you need to stay off your ankle until it can heal!"

"You don't understand!" Mrs. Brisby cried out desperately, shaking her head as she pointed to her the stone where her belongings were laid out. "My son needs the-"

She froze, eyes going wide and her heart seizing with *horror*.

Her dress was laid out across the stone and her cloak was hanging on the outcrop, as they had been from the start…but that was all. Nothing else had been set there with them.

Including an very important envelope of mixed herbs.

"No…nononononono! *Where is it?!*" She cried out in desperation, struggling violently against the fairy's grip as she tried to pull away; she desperately gripped the front of Zoe's dress with sheer desperation in her eyes, catching the surprised fairy off-guard. "*Where's the medicine?!*"

"Woah, *hey*! *Bad touch*!" Zoe exclaimed as she grabbed the doe's paws and pulled them off her bodice before their claws ripped it. "What are you talking about? What medicine?"

"In the Envelope!" Mrs. Brisby sobbed as she resumed her struggles, her eyes glimmering with desperate tears. "The large white envelope Mr. Ages gave me! *Did you see the envelope when you found me?! Do you have it?! Please, I'll give you anything!*"

"*Calm down*!" Zoe urged her, trying to hold her in place again, firmly yet calmly. "Everything you had when I found you is over on the rock: just the clothes on your back. I didn't see any 'envelope' of other kind of package, bag, or anything like that."

There was a moment of dead, horror-filled silence, neither making a sound.

Then Mrs. Brisby gave a cry that could only be described as pure anguish as she pulled herself out of the fairy's grasp and threw her shaking form across the bed, curling in on herself and sobbing hysterically into the pillow of leaves; huge tears rolled down her whiskers as she cried in absolute despair. She didn't hear Zoe ask what was wrong, nor did she feel the pain in her bones. All she could feel was the complete and utter sorrow crushing her heart.

She had failed to follow the warning Mr. Ages had given her.

She had lost Timmy's medicine.

Zoe had dealt with a lot of things in her life. *Truly* a lot. A long lifespan, doubled with being the familiar of a legendary beast, had given her experience in many things throughout life.

A woman in hysterics was *not* one of them.

If there was one thing that the dragon fairy could never understand about her own sex, it the outright baffling instability of female emotions. How they could go through life with such a chaotic mess of a mind and hormones, she would never know. She didn't have much experience in them herself, despite being a girl as well; the only emotions she really understood was exasperation with the world as a whole, the outright-savage thrill of spreading terror and suffering upon said world for its crimes against her sanity, and a small bit of affection she reserved solely for Spyro and her favorite kinds of food. Other than that, she was pretty much dead on the inside, having grown thoroughly done with the world and its bullshit a *long* time ago.

So, when presented with the mouse that had stolen the Lee of the Stone in the middle of a complete emotional breakdown, she found herself with a notable lack of preparation to say the *least*.

The small rodentkin doe was outright inconsolable at this point; she curled up into a small, furry ball of despair, sobbing helplessly into her paws. The blanket had fallen off her form, revealing her nude body to the world; she didn't even notice that she was exposed, too consumed by this sudden sorrow to realize her own state of being. That's how serious the situation was.

How important this missing envelope must be.

"I'm assuming this parcel of yours was important?" Zoe asked carefully, trying to prod out an answer of some kind. The mouse lowered her paws and looked at her with wet, reddened eyes.

"I-I-It was Timmy's medicine..." She whimpered mournfully, her breathing hitching with heavy sobs.

Zoe blinked: the name 'Timmy' was new. A fourth child? That would explain her absence during that whole mess with the shrew and her trap. She hummed thoughtfully, rubbing her chin with a finger. "Have you tried Pipsissewa Root? That's good for easing sympto-"

"It's not that!" The mouse cried in desperation, sitting up with a burst of energy. "He's sick with Pneumonia!"

Silence.

"Oh."

The young doe nodded, sniffing sorrowfully. "H-He's had a fever since yesterday and none of our usual medicines were working. S-So I went to Mr. Ages for help." The more she spoke, the more her voice began to crack. "H-He told me Timmy has Pneumonia, and g-gave me the m-medicine to help h-him. He will d-die if he doesn't get it, b-b-but that medicine was t-the o-only one Mr. A-Ages could m-m-make before he left f-for Rosebush City! A-A-And he won't b-b-be back until it's t-too l-l-late!"

She covered her face with her paws and wailed openly, fresh tears running down her snout and dripping from her whiskers. "M-My boy…*my baby*… he's going to die without that medicine! *A-And it's all my fault!"*

Zoe didn't say anything.

This was *none* of her concern. She *shouldn't* get involved in this any further. She was a Dragon Fairy: her duties, her loyalties, her very purpose, all of it was dedicated to her dragon and her dragon alone. What transpired in the lives of others, be they Rodentkin, Fae, or whatever Frith-molded creature was not something she was meant to get involved with. Something she shouldn't even care about, let alone waste time and energy on. The only reason she had done so in the first place, bringing the mouse into her camp, and tending her wounds, was because Spyro had willed it so.

Otherwise, she would've left her unconscious on the forest floor back when she first came out from watching the events in the riverbed take place.

Besides, they had gotten involved with Rodentkin enough as it was, and to continue doing so only invited disaster upon them even further. The risks of Spyro being discovered by them,was high enough already, to the point Zoe believed it to be inevitable, but that didn't mean she was in a rush to make it happen. The longer they could keep Spyro a secret, the more time they had to prepare both him and Feywild for the tides of fear and anger that were bound to follow the moment the rats discovered the presence of a living dragon in their lands. They had risked enough during their brief interactions already; thank the Hollow it had been only the children that had seen Spyro the day she had been caught in that old shrew's trap, or that 'first meeting of worlds' would've ended *very* differently.

Spyro *could* not get involved with the Rodentkin…*should* not get involved with them. He had suffered too much already: the failed mission, the exile, the bloody war and all its horrors. They had just gotten back, and they hadn't had time to *even begin* healing his wounds, mental or emotional.

They needed to stay away. They had nothing to gain from aiding them, and only everything to lose…

…But of all diseases…it just had to be *Pneumonia*, didn't it?

Zoe had, *indeed*, dealt with many things in her life.

Some of which she wouldn't wish on anyone else.

"When do you remember still having it last?" The fairy asked in a careful, uncertain tone, as if torn on the decision to ask at all.

Mrs. Brisby wiped her eyes with her paws, gasping weak sobs as she struggled to calm down and think of the answer to that question. Both proved to be a difficult task in itself, as her every thought was filled with the horrible knowledge that Timmy was going to die: images of her baby boy, precious and fragile, wasting away in his bed haunted her every

thought, wrenching her heart and making it even harder to recall the events before.

"I…I-I had it with me when the weasels attacked." She explained, collecting her thoughts the best she could through all her turmoil. "I-I remember tucking the envelope into my cloak so it wouldn't fall out when I was running on all fours." She rubbed her forehead with her fingertips, sniffling pathetically. "I-I had it with me when I ran up the log, I know that much, b-because I was holding it to keep from tearing it. A-And then I…I-I…"

The mouse froze, eyes going wide as what happened next took center stage in her mind's eyes.

She had jumped from the log and tumbled down the side of the cliff: a long, painful tumble that had thrown her head over heels several times, crashing through rocks and the bones of the dead animals that filled the dried river.

She swallowed hard, realization, fear, and just a touch of hope filling her heart.

"I-It's back in the River of Bones. Where I fell."

Zoe blinked at that, glancing to the side in thought. "Huh…*The River of Bones*…" She murmured, smirking with approval. "…I *like* it; a nice ring of forebode and dread."

Mrs. Brisby couldn't even begin to see what was so appealing about a literal river of death. But she didn't get a chance to say anything as the winged woman stood up, lifting her arms for a large stretch that was very unladylike, stretching the stiffness out of her back and legs.

"Welp, we better get go get it now, while they're still daylight."

Dread seized the mouse's heart at those words

"Y-Y-You mean g-go b-back to that *graveyard*?!" She stammered, vehemently shaking her head no. "I can't go back there! I *can't*!"

"You want to save your son's life, don't you?" Zoe asked, rolling her eyes in annoyance. Mrs. Brisby flinched, but softly nodded yes. "Then you don't have a choice…" The fairy stated simply. Her almost-harsh tone melted into concern, and she gave a heavy sigh. "I was hoping to keep you off your feet until you recovered, but if what you say is true…then I'm afraid I don't have a choice either."

She offered her hand. "Think you can walk with those ribs and that leg?"

"I c-can try." Mrs. Brisby stammered, giving the hand her paw.

It was an odd sensation as the human hand wrapped around her paw; the skin of it was smooth and hairless, almost slick to the touch, with longer grasping fingers more akin to the claws of a bird; very different than those of the rodentkin. With a surprising amount of gentle strength, Zoe slowly lifted her off the bed and back onto her feet…or foot, really; she gave a pained whine as her bad leg flared under the pressure, forcing her to lean her weight against her good leg, only able to use the other to keep her footing.

With a little help from the fairy she was able to stand with little pain, her ribs only slightly agitated by the pressure of her weight on her spine.

It was then, when she was finally able to stand again, was the mouse able to see just how tall her new 'friend' was. Mice had always been the smallest of the Rodentkin, and she herself was not a big mouse, so it wasn't the fact she was taller than was surprising. But having heard stories of the 'Little People of the Forest' throughout her life, she had always pictured them being as small as them, if not even smaller. That was clearly not the case, as Zoe was as tall as the average rat, about the same height Justin was. Mrs. Brisby had to lean her head back to look up at her, her own head only reaching up to the fairy's stomach, her ear-tips just reaching her bosom.

The fairy nodded with approval before stepping back. "Well, you can stand. That's as good a sign as any…and it will have to do," she told her as she turned away, gathering the mouse's dress and cloak off the rock. "Between the two of us, we should be able to find it and get your back to the Stone before nightfall."

There was still one problem, though. One very big, very powerful, purple problem.

"But what about the *Dragon*?" She asked, that lingering image of his sad eyes once again passing through her mind.

Zoe froze mid step, her shoulders tensing hard as stone. Any dread of 'potential danger' quickly vanished from Mrs. Brisby's mind as the very air felt as if it had dropped twenty degrees in temperature, her fur standing on end from the sheer aura of cold malice that radiated off the fairy standing in front of her, quickly feeling as if she was cornered by a hungry cat.

Then, as quickly as it came, it vanished. She could almost see the angry tension leave Zoe's body as she took a deep, deliberate breath, slowly yet forcefully letting it out in a long exhale.

Then the fairy promptly threw her clothes at her, catching her off guard and making her yelp in surprise as her dress and cloak slapped her across the front with a muffled 'thwump' of cloth and wrapped around her like a python, completely engulfing her from the stomach up. She staggered backwards in a clumsy hop, keeping off her bad foot, as she struggled to free herself from her own garments, her voice muffled by the fabric.

She manage to poke her head free just in time to see Zoe clasp her hands together and give her what *looked* like a warm smile, but sent icy shivers down her spine.

"I'm going to cut you some slack *just* this once, given everything you've been through today." She told her in a far-too sweet and 'deliberately-friendly' manner. "But speak ill of my charge and master again, and *I'll pluck every last strand of fur off your body and make you eat them*. Do you understand?"

Mrs. Brisby squeaked nervously, nodding frantically as she pushed her clothes down off herself. Zoe nodded in turn with approval before turning her back to the mouse, standing in silence. For a moment, Mrs. Brisby wondered what she was doing, until it clicked that she was waiting for her to get dressed, giving her the privacy to do so.

Blushing bright red under her fur, she murmured her thanks as she began to dress herself.

But that had confirmed it: Zoe's words regarding the dragon. As she pulled her head through the neck of her dress, she found herself staring at the back of the fairy's head, or more precisely at the pair of draconian horns poking out of her hair.

Horns that were an all-too familiar shape.

This fairy *knew* of the Dragon. Not just knew of it, but was *associated* with it; for Frith's sake, she had *dragon* horns!

Not only that, but she had outright called it *Master*.

What on earth did *that* entail? Was she a *servant* of the dragon? Did she serve the beast like some sort of great Dragon God? And if so, was it just her or did *all* fairies worship him like she did? Was *that* why the Fair Folk had closed their borders to all Rodentkin for all these years: to keep its presence a secret from the rest of Nimh? How long had it been living in the forest, then? How long had the fairies been raising a living force of nature within fire-breathing distance of the Empire?

Had *Johnathan* known about it?

Surely, he would've said something if he had; even if he had friends amongst the fairies, something like *this* was far too big to the Rodentkin to keep secret. At the very least, he would've told her, and *not* moved his family out *into its territory*.

But if this *was* its territory, then *surely* they would've seen it by now, wouldn't they? Where had it been for the past *nine years* they had been living under the Stone? Such a large creature would've been *impossible* to miss for so long: its size and brilliant color alone made it stand out enough, but the sheer presence of power that radiated from its form was as subtle as an erupting volcano or approaching tsunami.

She shivered at the memory of being in that presence; the tremendous invisible weight so heavy that it nearly crushed her where she lay on the ground. Those massive jaws dripping with the blood of the wood's most common predator turned prey. And the bright, all-consumed fire of rage that burned within those fierce, draconian eyes.

…those *sad, longing, pain-filled* eyes.

Another stab of pain filled her heart as her mind once again locked on the memory of seeing the sorrow within the dragon's eyes as he (not *it*…*he*) had lifted her to safety.

She paused slipping her arm into her sleeves, staring forward into nothingness as she felt a hot sadness of her own bubble within her chest and up her throat; out of everything she had seen of him…his size, his power, his monstrous form, his remorseless ferocity, his hunger for flesh, his *primal rage*…it was that *one* moment stood out above all the rest. Even all that she had seen before that moment was the one that clung to her mind, and every time it did so she felt the same ache in her own heart.

What *was* this pain? And *why* toward a *dragon* of all things? Why was she feeling this way to begin with? Yes, she could understand the pain in those eyes, even relate and sympathize with it to a degree, but it wasn't as though there was anything she *could* do.

She was a mouse, and he was a dragon. They were creatures of two entirely different worlds. Beings that had nothing in common, with no connection to each other outside of being polar opposites of the food chain.

So *why on earth* was she so *drawn* to those eyes?

To him?

"What's with *that* look?"

Zoe's voice broke through her inner turmoil, causing her to jump a little in surprise; she looked up to see the fairy giving her a perplexed stare, unsure of what to make of the face she must've been making during her conflicted

train of thought. She blinked a few times, clearing her head of her thoughts as she slipped her last arm through her sleeve, finally slipping her dress back on and herself into a comfortable state of modesty.

"S-Sorry." Mrs. Brisby stammered as she wrapped her cloak around herself, tying it off around her neck. "I was lost in thought."

"If he wanted to hurt you, he is more than capable of doing so. " Zoe told her; she seemed to guess what said thought was about, to an extent as least. "And he would've done so from the start…but he *didn't*. Quite the contrary: he *saved your life today*. ***Twice***. That in itself should be proof enough that he means you no harm."

Mrs. Brisby relaxed a little at those words, but still looked conflicted.

"But...but what *do* I do if he comes back?" She asked, this time carefully; a strong gut feeling told her the fairy's previous threat was by no means empty. "What should I say? Or do?"

Zoe stared at her for a moment of silence. Her face was decidedly unreadable, but her eyes were those of someone experiencing a strong internal debate; even just looking into them, the doe could outright see her struggling to decide whether or not she should say anything at all. If she should allow her and her family to be involved with this anymore than they already were. And for a moment, she looked as if she wasn't going to say anything at all.

But even she could tell that there wasn't a choice anymore: the fairy closed her eyes and gave a heavy sigh of resignation, rubbing her right temple with her fingers.

Then she looked to the young mother and spoke a single word:

"Spyro."

Mrs. Brisby blinked, taken aback with visible confusion. "What?"

"That's his name." Zoe told her as she turned her back to the mouse, glancing one last time over her shoulder as she made her way around the campfire. "If we comes across him while we're there, and we're not together for whatever reason, address him as such. He'll know where you learned it."

Spyro.

Mrs. Brisby barely registered the fairy's departure as she stared into the embers of the now-dying fire; leaving her to take in the name of the one who would change not just her life, but the lives of everyone on Nimh forever.

Something warm flickered in her chest as she quietly mouthed the name under her breath, and she found herself smiling just a little at the way it sounded in her voice: the Dragon....the legendary creature of fire and destruction, the newest Titan Beast of Nimh, and perhaps the most terrifying creature she had ever seen in her life...

His name was *Spyro*.

Chapter 11: Return to the River

Chapter Text

Mrs. Brisby had hoped she would never have to see this place again.

She stood a few good feet away from the edge, her recent fall down the rocky cliff still fresh in her mind, but she could still see it from there. She clasped her trembling paws against her chest, scooting a shaky step forward to stare down into the abyss, shivering with a deep, instinctual fear at the sight of the river.

She was not ready to return to it at all, especially just after she had escaped it.

Yet here she stood: At the edge of the abyss.

The River of Bones.

Zoe had been right: it was an all-too fitting name for a dried-up riverbed filled with the bodies of dozens of animals, all in a state of damage and decay. Blood-stain bones of medium-sized animals laid scattered across the sun-bleached ground, picked clean of their meat by razor-sharp teeth, some broken by jaws strong enough to bite clean through them. Hollowed-out corpses of larger animals lined the edges, their bellies split open by blade-like claws, with entrails messily devoured and massive bites of flesh having been ripped out of the carcass entirely. There were barely any remains of smaller animals, though, like mice and other similarly sized creatures, a severed head or limb at most, but there were enough of them to tell that even they were not spared the hunger of his gullet.

Given his sheer size, it was frankly a surprise that there were remains of smaller animals at all: a few lucky scraps that had been bitten off when he had snapped them up in one bite and swallowed them whole.

Even standing far away on the river's edge, a good distance away from the carnage, did little to ease the horror of it all. If anything, it seemed to make

it even worse: from here, she could see just how far the literal river of corpses spread. Far more-so than having fallen into one small part of it. The smell was no less unpleasant to bear either; the stench of rotting flesh filled the air like a miasma of death, causing her eyes to water and her sinuses to burn.

And the final touch to this showcase of death: the eerie silence that hung over the land: no songbirds, no animal calls, nothing. Nothing but the clouds of flies buzzing around the dead meat and the wind rustling the canopy above, which cast a dark shadow over this chasm of death.

This was a dark place, one of ruin brought forth by power, wrath, and *very* sharp teeth.

"Amazing, isn't it?"

The sudden voice caught her off guard, making her jump a little in surprise. She looked up to see Zoe standing next to her, gazing over the River of Bones with a look of *admiration* on her face.

"How much him simply being here has changed these lands, that is.” The fairy explained, glancing at her with eyes that *gleamed* with outright-twisted pride. "How much the *very order* of the forest itself has changed from Spyro’s mere *presence* alone. Only a few days ago, it was alive and singing the praises of spring. But now? *Silent as the grave*, neither bird nor beast daring to make their presence known, lest they make themselves his next meal."

She extended an arm out to the mass graveyard before them, as if showing it off to her. "*This* is the power of the *Dragon*. Of a force of nature given life."

Mrs. Brisby couldn't say she shared the fairy's borderline-barbaric admiration for this display of violence and gore, but she couldn't deny how much it spoke of ‘Spyro’s’ influence that he, a single beast, could impact the very world around him so much.

"He…" She swallowed nervously, licking the back of her teeth as she tried to gather her words. "…h-he doesn't eat mice, does he?"

To that, Zoe simply rolled her eyes again.

"He doesn't eat Rodentkin, if that's what you're asking." She stated simply, waving the mouse's concerns off with a hand. “That was never a danger to begin with: Dragon Honor forbids the consumption of the flesh of innocent Soul Bearers. *'Only the Wicked or the Guilty may be devoured in the name of Vengeance'*. Such as those weasels, who *chose* to hunt and eat a fellow Enlightened out of a perverse thrill, rather than filling their bellies with the meat already available…so, no: he has *never* killed or eaten Rodentkin before."

Mrs. Brisby blinked in surprise at that claim, and she dared another look into the pit of carnage.

And to her realization, she found that the fairy was telling the truth: all the corpses in that pit were of the Feral versions of those species. The heads/skulls were all of their animal counterparts: sideways-facing eye sockets, flattened heads with small brain-cases, no complex facial muscles or expressions of fear frozen on the ones that still had skin. There were also no items to show that they had been intelligent, either: no remains of clothing, weapons, or accessories of any kind that were the universal symbols of 'Enlightenment' amongst all of Nimh's races.

She understood that carnivores had to eat meat to survive; she didn't like the idea of creatures dying and suffering, but she understood that was how Frith made them, to keep his world in balance. She also understood that hunting Ferals wasn't always a successful endeavor, as beasts proved harder to find, chase down, and kill. If he decided to, it would be all too easy for a meat-eater of his size and power to gorge himself on all the Rodentkin flesh he could eat, and there would be little that anyone could do to stop him if he did.

But he didn’t. If the fairy was right, this ‘Spyro’ *refused* to take the life of an innocent Soul Bearer, even at the cost of such a convenience, for no other reason than his own moral standing.

Once again showing himself to be quite unlike the dragons sung of in a minstrel’s fancies.

"And up we go!"

"EEEEP!" Mrs. Brisby squealed in alarm as she was quite suddenly, and *literally*, swept off her feet. While she wasn't paying attention, Zoe had come up behind her and, with all the tact and grace of an upset porcupine, scooped her up in her arms bridal-style. The mouse was left beet-red in the face: last time she had been carried like this was by Johnathan, over the threshold of their newly-finished house for a rather *intimate* night. She never expected to be carried like this again following his death, let alone by another female.

"*W-W-W-What* are you *doing*?!" She stammered in a high-pitched squeak, too shocked by her current position to react otherwise.

Zoe, however, simply gave her that same look of unamused exasperation that she was becoming rather familiar with. "Would you rather try *climbing back down* the cliff-face?" she asked flatly. "With *that* leg, no less?"

Oh. That was fair. Mrs. Brisby glanced away in embarrassment, trying not to acknowledge the awkwardness of their position.

"I didn't think so." Zoe stated simply as her wings snapped open with an almost-flamboyant flair; the sight of them made Mrs. Brisby realize, with no short amount of horror, what she was intending to do. But before she could say anything, the fairy broke into a light jog toward the edge, her wings beginning to flutter with the twinkling of magic, creating a cloud of glowing magenta pixie dust as they did so.

"WAIT!" She cried in panic, fear clenching her heart.

Zoe nearly stumbled mid-step at her cry, looking down at her passenger with annoyance, even as the mouse's paws gripped tightly to her dress. “Oh, what *now*?”

"N-Not so fast! P-Please!" Mrs. Brisby whimpered, shivering in place. "…I-I'm afraid of heights."

There was a moment of silence.

Then Zoe *laughed*. Outright *laughed* at her, said laughter carrying an outright magical quality to it, like the tinkling of wind chimes.

"Was this *before* or *after* you literally jumped off a cliff?" she asked in unabashed amusement. Mrs. Brisby's heart twisted with hurt, and she could feel the tears prick at her eyes.

"I-It's not funny!" She exclaimed, even as the fairy continued to chuckle at her. "I didn't know about the cliff! *I nearly died*!"

"You're a *mouse*. Literally *every day* you live is a day you nearly die." Zoe humored as her laughter died down to light chuckles. "And hey, look on the bright side: you now know about the riverbed, so no more jumping off it anymore. And it'll be quite the story to tell your kids when you get back."

Mrs. Brisby opened her mouth to snap something back, but whatever words she wanted to say were quickly forgotten as Zoe's wings fluttered up again and they were suddenly airborne.

She clenched up in fear and clung to the fairy as if her life depended on it, squeezing her eyes shut as she felt herself rise off the sturdiness of the ground, her innards sinking in her belly as gravity was pulled against them. She fought the urge to cry or scream (or perhaps both) as she felt them shift from going up to going down, her innards rising up in her chest and throat as she felt an all-too familiar weightlessness of descent. Her mouth was clamped shut in gritted fear, forcing her to breathe through her nose, the putrid smell of rotting meat getting stronger with each passing second.

As if the urge to throw up wasn't strong enough at it was…

However, it was a much slower descent this time; despite finding humor in her misfortune, Zoe respected her fears and was making the trip as smooth as she could.

And just as the nightmare seemed like it was going to last forever, it ended: with a soft jolt and an uncomfortable lurch of her insides, Mrs. Brisby felt them touch down on solid ground. She could've passed out from sheer relief, a heavy sigh escaping her lips as her whole body relaxed, and she was finally able to open her eyes.

Only to be greeted by a very familiar sight. One she had hoped to never see again.

She knew returning to the River of Bones would not be a pleasant experience in the slightest, but even then, she was *not* prepared to find herself in the *exact same spot* she had nearly been killed in. The log loomed overhead like a great overhanging rock formation, taunting her with its very presence, while the remains of the two weasels laid scattered across the ground between her and the cliff's edge, which was still soaked in a large smear of red from where the dragon had crushed one of them against it. There was little left of the weasel that had pinned her, though: the severed head and a few scattered pieces of limbs and tail were all that remained, the rest having been devoured by the beast.

She swallowed the bile building in her throat, the memories playing in her mind's eye like a horrible theater performance of death. The screams of the dying predator, along with the sickening crunch of its bones, would haunt her for many years to come.

“See it anywhere?” Zoe, who looked completely unaffected by the sights and smells around her, asked.

Mrs. Brisby shook her head no; the last thing she wanted to do right now was open her mouth. The fairy hummed thoughtfully at that, tapping her finger against her chin as she looked about.

“The wind might’ve blown it elsewhere, though I doubt it couldn’t have been blown far, given the river walls…” She muttered aloud, before turning back to the mouse. “You stay here and search around this area: keep your wounds from getting any worse. And I’ll search further abroad, see if I can.”

Mrs. Brisby nodded in agreement, still keeping her mouth closed; as Zoe took to the air once more, she took a steady breath to ease her nerves (as much as she could) and began her part of the search. Her bad ankle flared with a dull pain with each step she took with it, forcing her to limp as she walked, and the rest of her bones ached with varying levels of soreness with each movement. But she continued on despite it all.

Her son was waiting for her to return. And she wouldn't let him down.

That didn’t make the current task at hand any easier, though.

Mrs. Brisby prided herself on being a mouse who kept her hands clean of conflict and violence; even when at her angriest, she had never raised her claws against anyone. Never lashed out in a blind temper. Never raised her voice above the required amount of volume. She was a mouse who wanted nothing more than life than peace and happiness for herself and her family, never having once caused anyone or anything to shed a single drop of blood.

Her paws had been clean of bloodshed her entire life.

Never in a million years would she have imagined that she would lose her cleanliness from blood by *digging through the remains of the dead*, her arms literally soaked to the elbows in viscera red.

She sat on her knees, searching through the piles of bodies in a desperate attempt to find the envelope, which could be hidden anywhere among the sea of white and red. Many of the torn-apart skeletons were still covered in half-eaten flesh that clung to the red-stained bones, while the larger animals were still somewhat whole, still covered in fur and with only a few bites taken out of it…and all their insides spilled out across the ground, forming a makeshift carpet of gore for her to wade through; she was pretty sure she was currently standing in what remained of some poor boar’s spleen.

She couldn’t tell which was worse: the skin-curling sensation of raw flesh and organs squishing between her fingers, the stomach-churning squelch every time she was forced to step in the pulped remains of some-creature’s

organs, or the *absolutely Frith-awful* ***STENCH*** of dead flesh, blood, and pus that assaulted her nose with the force of a swung sledge-hammer. *A putrid, rotting sledge-hammer.*

It was nothing short of a miracle that she hadn't thrown up yet.

The groan that could only be described as pure, unadulterated displeasure broke through the silence; eager for the chance to look away from all the gross, Mrs. Brisby turned to see Zoe stomping towards her, looking fit to murder someone. The fairy looked even worse off than she did: her once yellow and orange dress was soaked red and black in blood and Frith knows what else, bile dripping from the tips of her petal skirts, while her once-vibrant hair was sagging and crusty from it. Her eyes burned with the promise to strangle the first living creature that dared to cross her path, her lips twisted into a tooth-bearing snarl.

"I have endured a *lot*, and I mean a ***LOT***, of both metaphorical and *literal* shit in my lifetime." Zoe growled outright as she approached, pulling a sticky clump of what looked like purple spaghetti from her hair. "And believe it or not, this was not the worst of it…but *spelunking* through the hollowed remains of a dead deer is *easily* in the top ten, *maybe* even the top five…and I think it might've been pregnant, too."

Mrs. Brisby tried not to dwell on *that* disturbing thought any more than she was forced to, changing the subject immediately. "Did yo-?"

It was a mistake to attempt to speak: the moment she opened her mouth, the putrid taste of death in the air assaulted her tongue with all the subtlety of a slap to the face. She clapped her paws over her mouth, cheeks bulging as she fought to keep her stomach down.

"No, not yet. Just need a minute to get my nerves back." Zoe said bitterly, moving to a dry spot in the riverbed clear of any form of gore. The fairy's shoes left bloody footprints on the clean gravel as she made her way to a nearby rock and sat down on it, giving a heavy sigh of relief as she did so. She gave Brisby a look over. "You look as if you could use a break as well; your son won't die waiting just a little longer."

She patted the top of the stone next to her. “Come. Sit.”

As much as she didn’t want to stop looking, she knew she needed a break herself: another moment of digging through dead animals and she would lose more than just her breakfast. Not taking her paws off her mouth, Mrs. Brisby stepped away from her own search and joined her, grateful just to not be stepping through the remains of animals anymore. At least Zoe had the fortune to be wearing shoes…

She sat down next to her new companion, finally removing her paws and taking a much-needed breath of fresh (or at least relatively fresh) air. She also took the moment to try and clean herself the best she could, rubbing her face in the usual mouse-like manner to try and clean the blood off of her fur, to little success. Meanwhile, Zoe said nothing as she hitched up the front of her skirts and fished out the leg bone of a sparrow that had got caught under them; she examined it for a moment before promptly tossing it over her shoulder, not giving it a second thought as it clattered amongst the others.

“…How can you *stand* it?” Brisby finally asked, unable to hold it back any longer. “All this death…all this b-blood…it’s *horrible*. And to see it *every day*.”

“Eh, when you’ve dealt with it as long as I have, you get use to it.” Zoe stated simply with a shrug, not taking her attention away from removing ‘remains’ from her person. “I *will* admit, though: today’s been an…*extreme* example, for sure…but when you work with the world’s mightiest carnivore, death-and-blood’s something that just comes with the territory.”

That made the mouse pause as the same question she had asked herself before came to mind.

"And...h-how long have you fairies been 'working' with him?" She asked carefully, knowing how sensitive the topic was for the horned fairy. "The D-Dragon, I mean."

At that, Zoe paused herself. She had no obligation to tell the mouse anything. She *shouldn't* tell the mouse anything; she was already breaking

so many laws by just associating with this small family of Rodentkin, even if just in passing help, let alone actually speaking of the Jendovahzoor to them...but for that very reason, she found herself compelled to do so. To simply stick it to all the self-righteous bastards that thought they knew what was best for her dragon...when in truth, these mice actually knew more of him than they did. Besides, they were already this deep into the mire already; what was another few causal breaks of Fae Law at this point?

"Fifty years." She finally answered. "That's how long we Fairies have been taking care of him."

Mrs. Brisby blanched at the revelation, eyes going wide. *Fifty years*. A *third* Titan Beast, a *Dragon* no less, had been living on Nimh for *half a century*?!

Zoe smirked at the face she was making. "Yeah. That long." She told her, wiping the blood from her own. "Fifty years ago, the Night Patrols found him in a cave beneath the Crystal Mountains; he had literally just hatched from his egg, still wet and clawing out of the shell. He's been with us ever since."

The mouse stared ahead, trying to comprehend what she had just learned. "...that's the same time Feywild closed its borders to the rest of Nimh." She muttered, perking up in realization. "Is he-?"

"Yep." Zoe popped the word, not missing a beat. "The Calendula Council decided it was in his best interests that we keep his existence a secret from the Rodentkin, so we closed off the borders to prevent him from getting out, and you guys from getting in, both in the name of keeping anyone from finding out about him."

She then gave a small scoff, turning to look at the Rodentkin with amused eyes.

"But, given who I'm talking to right now, I'd say that was a moot endeavor."

Mrs. Brisby flinched a little at those words. "I-I didn't know that this was Feywild." She stammered, panic starting to grow in her chest as the gravity of the situation began to register in her mind. "Johnathan t-my husband, he

told me that these lands were a place where we would be safe. W-W-We didn't mean to intrude on anything, please-!"

"Relax. I, for one, am not going to do anything." The fairy reassured her. "What those nectar-indulgent idiots want is none of my knowledge nor concern. They can all go suck a toad's wart, for all I care. Besides, Spyro seems to like you, to the point that he's let you keep your home in his favorite sunning spot, which is pretty impressive given how dragons usually are about sharing anything."

Mrs. Brisby blinked, taken aback. "He...*likes* me?"

Now it was Zoe's turn to look uncertain. "It's...complicated, and I'd rather not get into the details myself." She admitted. "Let's just say, after all the shit Spyro's been through these last couple of years, you and your family's peaceful life are...*comforting* to him, for lack of a better word. Though he's know better than to get *too* involved, so don't worry about that; we were already pushing limits just by talking to your kids the other da-."

The fairy's eyes went wide, and her hand shot up to cover her mouth, but it was too late.

"Wait, *what*?!" The now-alarmed mother exclaimed in shock. "When did-?!"

She paused, realization flooding her features, leaving her staring at the embarrassed fairy. It all suddenly fell into place: Cynthia's scare in the forest, the dead section of the farmland that looked as if it had been drained, that whole fiasco with Auntie Shrew ranting and raving about a 'fairy' she caught in one of her traps, her children's quiet gossiping and whispers, *'making friends with the sad purple monster'*.

"*You're* the fairy that my aunt caught in her trap!" She exclaimed, eyes wide with surprise. "And your dragon was *the one who*-"

"We didn't mean for *that* to happen!" Zoe quickly interjected, holding a hand up to silence the mouse. When she did quiet down, the fairy gave an exaggerated groan and rubbed her face. "*Look*...that whole thing was one

big accident: we had just returned from a long voyage and didn't know you guys had moved under the stone at the time, and Spyro ended up spooking your daughter *by mistake*. All that went down was a crazy domino effect that none of us intended to happen. Blame me for my part all you want, but Spyro doesn't mean you, your children, or your home any harm...I give you my *word* on it."

Mrs. Brisby wanted to say more. She had a lot of questions and fears running through her mind that she wanted answers to. And she fully intended to get them eventually...but right now, seeing the look of regret and pleading in Zoe's eyes, not for herself but for her friend...to hear her willing to shoulder all the blame in his stead...

"...you really care about him, don't you?" Mrs. Brisby whispered.

Zoe nodded, lowering her gaze. "He's all I have *to* care about."

Thoooommm…

The icy-cold grip of dread filled the mouse's heart as the distant rumble echoed across the land, just as a gust of wind suddenly blew through the chasm, whipping up leaves and scattering them further down the riverbank, nearly knocking over the two small creatures. Both of them looked to the direction both the wind and the rumble came from: to the north, toward the distant open ocean. They were far too inland to see the ocean itself, but they were more than able to see the massive clouds rolling in over the far horizon.

The massive, dark, ever-approaching clouds of a early spring storm.

"The first storm of spring..." Mrs. Brisby muttered in dread.

"It's *early* this year." Zoe growled, scowling with displeasure as she stood up, her wings and dress beginning to flutter against the wind. "It'll be on us by dark. We have to find the medicine now, before this entire riverbed is underwater."

"We have to hurry!" Mrs. Brisby exclaimed, outright jumping to her feet. "We only have-AHH!" Only to stumble backwards as her ankle exploded with pain, causing her to fall back onto the rock she had been sitting on.

"*You* have to stay here until I get back." Zoe told her, grabbing hold of her shoulders and lifting her back up into a sitting position. "You can't go *anywhere* with that leg."

"B-but the medicine!"

"*I'll* find the medicine." The fairy assured her, pointing to herself for emphasis. "I can fly, and thus can search the riverbed faster than you can. And I'm willing to bet my wings that the wind carried it down-river." She pointed to the mouse. "*You* wait here and keep off that leg until I get back. *Trust me* on this...alright?"

Despite all she had just learned, trust wasn't why Mrs. Brisby wanted to object; she wanted to help, the desperation to find Timmy's medicine before it was too late urging her to go on, despite the logic of Zoe's words. But she knew she couldn't; she was right: a fairy's wings would carry her a lot faster than a mouse's wounded leg would, and they were running out of time as it was.

She had no other choice.

"Please hurry." Was all she could bring herself to say.

To that, Zoe merely nodded. With a flair of her wings and a fluttering of pixie dust, the fairy took to the skies; she struggled a little bit to stay in place against the growing storm-winds, but eventually got high enough to wear she could see the entire left-to-right of the riverbed. At that point, it was simply a matter of letting the wind take her down river, like a fish swimming in the current, and she was soon out of sight and sound, leaving poor Mrs. Brisby to sit on the stone, tears of dread pricking her eyes as horrible thoughts clouded her mind.

The more the winds blew, the more she began to think Zoe was right: the wind could have carried it away, but only Frith knew how far it could've

blown, or if it had been torn or soaked against anything it landed on. Would the medicine still be any good if they did find it? Or was it already a loss cause?

She buried her face into her paws, giving a deep, shuddering sigh.

"*Please*…" She begged in one weak, final whisper. With all her heart and soul, even as both crumbled within her breast. "…*Help me.*"

Thoooommm…

Another peal of thunder echoed across the land; this one was extra strong, as if to mock her final prayers for her child's life. She could feel it in the earth itself, rumbling softly beneath her.

Thoooommm…

She paused, her eyes opening as a second, identical rumble shifted through the ground.

Thoooommm…

Her gaze fell upon a blood-puddle in front of her, formed from the remains of the boar nearby. It suddenly rippled as a third vibration shook the earth, this one significantly heavier than the last, in an identical pattern to the first two.

Thoooommm…

Another thundered through the ground, the puddle rippling violently.

Thoooommm…

This wasn't thunder.

She didn't even have time to come to realization when she felt it: a presence she had felt only once before but recognized all too well. The feeling was very similar to the distant storm that was steadily approaching, but clearly a separate entity entirely, as if there were two great forces of nature before

her. One in the far distance, and the second within the nearby trees and growing closer with each of those heavy, thunder-like thuds.

The thuds of heavy footfalls.

A crash rang throughout the gulch, this time of splintering wood, as the plants on the bank opposite of the log were split apart and sent crashing to the ground. Mrs. Brisby jumped from both the surprise of the crash and the impact, throwing her onto her back. She scrambled to regain her balance, propping herself up on her hands, and stared up in surprise, awe, and instinctive fear as a very familiar form stepped out from the edge of the forest, shoving the smaller trees and bushes aside or underfoot.

His dark-purple scales glistened like polished amethysts in the evening sun. The folds in his wing membranes and the dorsal frill on his head fluttered in the wind, the rest of him standing strong against it. And a pair of fiery draconian eyes glowed in the dim light as they locked with her own.

The Dragon had returned.

No, she remembered: not 'the dragon'…*Spyro*.

Spyro had returned.

Chapter 12: Savior of Timothy Brisby

Chapter Text

She knew she had no reason to be afraid.

This Dragon…'Spyro', as she recalled, was the being that had *saved her life*. ***Twice***. Not only that, but he had also willingly given up a part of his own home so they could have theirs, despite them being the trespasser. He was family to the fairies of Feywild, truly was a dragon that defied all expectations for his species. There was no reason to be afraid of him.

Expect, even with all the reasoning on her side, she couldn't help being a little…*anxious*.

Mrs. Brisby stared, wide-eyed and mouth slightly agape, at the sight of the massive beast that had stepped straight out of legend and into the real world, unable to tear her gaze away from the living, breathing dragon that stood on the riverbed's edge, watching her with his own wide-eyed stare. His dark-purple scales glistened like polished amethysts in the evening sun, and his underbelly shimmered like gold. His wing membrane was a fiery orange-red, and the way they fluttered slightly in the wind almost reminded her of the way open flame danced. And his fiery draconian eyes, glowing in the dim light, locked on her with the intensity of tiny suns, trying and failing to comprehend why on earth this little creature had wandered back into its dining hall; the last place in the world he had ever expected her to return, she imagined.

He had no idea why on earth she would return to this horrid place. A place where she had almost died. So, to see her back must've been surprising and a little suspicious.

She attempted to swallow her nervousness but failed, for her mouth was as dry as the riverbed she was in, leaving her licking the roof of it behind her teeth in an attempt to find her voice.

“Hel-…H-H-Hello…” She croaked, wringing her paws together; it was all she could bring herself to say.

If ‘Spyro’ could speak, he didn’t. He just continued to stare at her, blinking his secondary set of eyelids for moisture, not taking his eyes off her for a second. Even as he stepped forward towards the edge of the river and climbed down the side of the cliff, hopping down the steep bank much like a cat would, he continued to keep her in his direct line of sight. It was all Mrs. Brisby could do to stay where she was, curling up on herself as the dragon stepped down into the riverbed and slowly approached her, pausing every now and then to sniff the air like an animal, taking in her scent, as well as the scent of the blood staining her fur and clothes.

It was now, when he was this close and she was not utterly consumed by fear, that she was able to get a good, up-close look at this creature of stories, and notice things she hadn’t before.

The first thing that definitely stood out was how big he was...though, he was not nearly *as* big as she was expecting. If she were a normal sized mouse, and Nimh a land of normal-sized creatures and plants, then this dragon would about the size of a fox. Still truly large compared to her small self, but hardly the gigantic monster that towered over forests and stretched as long as rivers, as many a minstrel’s fancies had sung them as. They had rooms in Rosebush City's grand palace, such as the throne room and courtroom, that could comfortably hold him within its walls without crowding.

The next thing she noticed was how small he seemed. Not in terms of size, but rather in body: of how parts of his body looked either a tad smaller or a tad larger than it was supposed to be, even if she didn’t know what the ‘supposed to be’ really was: the neck and torso that looked to be slimmer than it was supposed to, limbs that looked a bit too long for their width, wings that were a tiny bit short for his body, and eyes that were a touch large for the head. Something about all these factors was ringing a bell deep within her core, and she felt herself drawn even harder to him, but for the life of her she couldn’t figure out why.

But the thing she certainly noticed the most, by far, now that she could see them, were the *scars*.

They decorated his body from nose to tail tip, painting his body like a tapestry of war and violence; scars that ranged in size and shape from small cuts to large gashes. Some straight and clean from blades, and other ragged and torn by claws; some around his paws were clearly burn marks (how a dragon could receive burns was beyond her), while his wings sported many holes and tears along the edges of his membranes, the ones further inward having healed and scarred over long ago.

This was a creature that had endured many great and terrible battles in his life, and simply being alive was the proof he had that he had won each and every one. The weasels he killed weren’t even worth the effort it took to kill them by comparison, were they?

Not when he had faced so much worse before.

She was so caught up in looking over the dragon's features (especially his scars) that she didn't even realize how close he was getting until his shadow fell over her tiny form. She blinked in surprise before leaning back to gawk at the massive head that approached her; there was no time to get up and step away, as she was still sitting upon the rock, and could only pull her legs up and crawl backwards to the other edge, giving a small, nervous hiccup of a squeak as the dragon leaned his head in until his snout was no more than a foot or two away from her; close enough for her to touch him if she had the courage to do so.

She could feel the heat of an open flame blast against her face, ruffling her fur, with every exhale the beast took, similar to the heat from a large bonfire. Hear the sound of his scales shifting against each other with his every movement. Feel the rumbling vibrations in the very earth beneath her every time he inhaled a breath.

And his *eyes*.

Dear Frith Above, his ***eyes***.

He was close enough so that she could see her frightened expression staring back at her deep within his silt pupils, their glow casting an intense light over her like a beam of sunlight through the clouds. Never before had seen eyes that radiated with such 'power', for lack of a better word, gleaming with a primordial strength and ferocity that could not be found in all of Frith's creations.

She might as well have been under the gaze of the Great Circle himself.

And yet, for all the sheer intensity of his eyes, the power of his form, and the hateful ruggedness of his scarred body, he showed her no signs of hostility whatsoever. His mouth remained closed, sealing away his many sharp teeth from view, and for all their bright, fiery intensity, not a single drop of anger or malice was to be seen in his eyes. Only an innocent, almost child-like curiosity…along with that look of resigned sorrow that was all too familiar to her.

And after seeing the condition his body was in, she now had a good idea as to *why* they held such sorrow.

The dragon said nothing as he closed the distance between them, pressing his snout against her stomach; she gave another nervous squeak as the rock-solid scales pressed into her, causing her to freeze on the spot in shock; it felt like a solid wall of smooth river stones being pushed against her. She could feel the air pulling at her as he sniffed her fur, which was visibly fluttering with the moving air of each breath, each sniff outright pulling on her body and clothes as he took in her scent, like a dog sniffing a new-found friend.

Then his mouth opened just enough to allow his long, forked tongue to slide out towards her like a giant snake.

“W-Wait!” Mrs. Brisby cried, instinctively putting her mitten-wrapped hands up in a desperate attempt to stop him from doing what he was intending to do.

This, however, only seemed to be what he wanted, as without even pausing, he leaned in and gave a soft, small lick across her open palms…well, small

by his standards. She grimaced as the large slab of meat and tastebuds ran across her lower arms, coating them in the sensation of hot, sticky saliva that soaked clear through the bandages, causing a shiver of disgust to run through her body…

…only for it to be followed by a sudden sensation of intense relief as the ache in her hands *ceased*.

The gauze around her paws began to rip and fall away, like wet tissue paper in a stream of hot water, allowing her fingers to wiggle free in the air. It was then she saw them, and her eyes widened in surprise: her hands were healing. The scrapes that covered the palms, gained from her tumble into the river, were literally mending before her very eyes, the tiny cuts and wounds sealing closed with fresh, newly-healed skin and the inflamed redness fading into a healthy, cool pink. And as they disappeared, so too did their lingering ache. Soon they were as good as new, as if the tumble never happened.

She could scarcely believe her eyes, even as she flexed her fingers in testing, only to feel no pain from their movement.

It had to be magic.

Dragon magic.

She barely had time to comprehend what had happened before the dragon in question stuck out his tongue again, this time weaving it under her arms and running across her lower torso, sending an intense tickling sensation through her body. She gave a high-pitched squeal of a giggle at the sensation, squirming in a futile attempt to get away, only for him to lick at her body again.

“A-A-Ah! P-P-Please s-stop!” Mrs. Brisby stammered as she pushed herself away from the dragon’s touch, scooting backwards on the rock she sat on. “T-T-That t-t-tickles!”

That, however, only seemed to encourage Spyro to continue, a trill of amusement coming from his throat as he licked her one final time before

retracting his tongue, leaving her with a rather sticky-wet corset, soaked with saliva as well. However, just as before, she could feel the pain fading from her ribs as they were magically mended, the ache in her body fading in an outright pleasant sensation. She gave a heavy sigh of relief as she was finally able to sit properly without hurting her sides, wiping her hands off her dress to clean them of spit.

Only for the dragon's tongue to promptly smack her in the face, running upwards in one long lick.

"…Ew." Was all she could bring herself to say, the fur on her head now sticking straight up and her whiskers slick with spit. Even as her head began to feel better and her thoughts became clearer as the injury on her forehead mended, she couldn't stop the second shiver of disgust from running through her. Instead of saying anything, she simply brought her hands up and wiped her face clean in a very mouse-like manner, matting her fur back down and cleaning her whiskers.

All that was left was her ankle; the one part that hurt the most. She was almost anticipating the relief she would get from it. However, 'Spyro' didn't make a move to tend it, at least not at first; he stood there and looked at her feet, which were hidden beneath her skirts, before turning his gaze up to her in waiting. It took her a moment to realize that he was actually waiting for her permission. Blushing a little, she obliged and lifted her skirt up just enough to show him her ankle, which was still in the makeshift splint Zoe had made for her.

To that, Spyro leaned down and finished tending to the poor mouse's wounds; his tongue lapped the top of the digitigrade ankle joint, causing a little bit of pain from the pressure at first…but she could've outright wept with relief then and there at the outright-euphoric sensation of the pain of a twisted ankle slipping away, like filth being washed away with water. She could outright see the swelling of the joint fade, the angry bloated red slowly shrinking down to a wonderful chocolate-milk brown. The splint around her ankle gave way as the wet gauze crumbled away from her foot, the two sticks falling to the ground with a clatter.

The dragon then retracted his tongue, licking the end of his snout before closing his jaws again, hiding away his sharp teeth once more.

Mrs. Brisby pushed her skirt back down and stood up, now able to do so without pain, looking up at the great beast with a newfound sense of appreciation; if there had been any remaining doubt of his kindness, it was now completely gone, along with any form of anxiety she may have felt (as well as any pain her body had previously endured from the fall).

“You truly are kind, aren’t you?” She asked, her voice filled with relief.

The reaction she got to that was one she was not expecting at all; he blanched a little at her words, before giving a grumbling trill of a croon as he looked away to the side, eyes narrowed as he tried not to meet her gaze, warbling sounds like muttering growls under his breath.

For a moment, she wondered what he was doing, afraid he might be offended, until it hit her:

He was *pouting*.

Just like Martin did whenever she praised him for being kind to his mother or to his siblings; he was at that age where he felt being strong and tough were what made a male mouse, going on about how nothing ever scared him (a flat out lie, if the Spider Incident was anything to judge by), and thinking that being nice was something that made one look weak and soft. And thus always got upset when his mom praised him for his acts of kindness towards others, making him feel as such.

She brought her hand up to her mouth, her fingers brushing over her lips as she held back a giggle. Seeing this giant, fire-breathing beast of legend acting just like her eldest son just tickled her pink. Making her realize just how silly her past fears had been all this time.

It was outright *cute*.

His pouting, however, turn into a more serious look of concern as his eyes ran over her form, settling the spots that he had just tended to, before he

looked back to her with a questioning, almost displeased, look: ‘Why did you come back, after all this?’, he seemed to say.

“I’m…I’m sorry if I caused you any worry, coming back here.” Mrs. Brisby said softly, now confident that he could understand her, if his reactions were anything to go by. “But, you see, my son’s life is in great danger.”

To that revelation, Spyro’s eyes widened, and he cocked his head to the side with a croon of questioning.

“He’s very sick with Pneumonia; he can’t even get out of bed.” The mouse continued, rubbing her paws together. “This morning, I went to Mr. Ages to get some medicine for him, and I was heading home with it when the weasels attacked, and I lost the medicine down here when I fell…”

“Of all the repulsive, disgusting, *asinine* shit I’ve ever had to put up with…” Zoe muttered under her breath as she flew back up the riverbed, occupied with removing a brand-new coating of animal remains from her person. She was so preoccupied with her current task that she almost missed the fact that Spyro had returned, taking notice of her dragon only mere seconds before she almost revealed herself. She blinked in surprise before instinctively darting down behind one of his larger kills, keeping herself hidden as she watched the scene before her.

Mrs. Brisby was actually speaking to Spyro. Talking to him as if she didn’t see him as a giant, terrible monster anymore. And given her missing bandages (as well as her shinier fur), she had a good guess why.

Part of her wanting to step in and stop this interaction; her duties to her dragon, as well as King Oberon’s orders, told her that she needed to keep Spyro as far away from the Rodentkin as possible. There was too much at risk to allow Spyro to be discovered by them as a whole. All it would take was for one of them (most likely the old Shrew) to scream ‘dragon’ and then everyone would know the truth, and the entire continent would descend into chaos.

But at the same time, something deep within her gut told her to sit back and let this play out. To see what would come of this interaction between the mighty and the meek…

"…and Mr. Ages won't be back until it's too late."

By the time she had finished her explanation, she was fighting outright to keep the tears from falling; the image of dear little Timmy, helpless and weak in his bed, dominated her mind as a heavy cloud of despair. All the while, Spyro remained silent at his listened with rapt attention, his gaze not once breaking away from her.

"That's why I've come back." She sniffed, wiping the tears from her eyes with the edge of her cloak. "I have to find Timmy's medicine, or he won't last the night."

A moment of silence passed between the two, broken only by Mrs. Brisby's attempts to keep herself from openly crying, the poor mouse left sniffling into her cloak.

Then she heard the dragon move.

She looked up to see the great beast stepping away from her before turning to her left, heading towards the empty spot where she had first fallen into the river. He ignored the remains of the weasels and lowered his snout to the ground, taking in slow, deliberate sniffs of the earth, nostrils flaring with a flame-like glow. Mrs. Brisby watched silently as the dragon then followed the scent he had caught; along the same path she had taken to avoid him when they first met.

She felt rather silly about that now, knowing that all of that fear and caution had ultimately been in vain. She watched, curious, wondering what he could possibly be doing, as he continued to follow the trail up the side of the same cliff-face she had climbed, standing up on his hind legs and propping himself up against it with his forelimbs, much like how a dog would stand against a tree, barking up at a cat it had chased up it. But instead of barking at anything, Spyro continued to follow the scent he was

on, climbing up the side of the cliff-face like a large lizard, until he came to the exact same tangle of roots that she had climbed up in her attempt to go home…and nearly fell from when they gave out from beneath her, leaving-

Wait…

Her ears perked up in realization, and she looked up with a spark of hope in her eyes. Was he-?

Spyro promptly grabbed the largest of the roots with his jaws and ripped it from the ground above him with a single, mighty pull. There was a loud cracking noise as the tree above outright shifted in place, leaves falling from its branches from the force of the tug, as well as a shower of earth as the tangle was pulled apart by the dragon's raw strength alone; said shower peppered his scaly face with dirt and stones, following to the riverbed alone in a cloud of dust.

And there, flung from the tangle the moment he pulled it free and now fluttering in the air like a beautiful butterfly of white, was Timmy's medicine.

Mrs. Brisby's heart felt like it would burst from sheer joy, her face beaming in an open-mouth smile as the white envelope floated down, spinning in the air, before finally coming to land just in front of the rock she was sitting on. No longer bound in place by her injuries, the mouse wasted no time rushing forward and snatching up the parcel in a tight hug.

"That's it! Timmy's Medicine!" She cried with joy, twirling in place with the sheer emotion. "You found it! Oh, Frith Above, *you found it*!"

Zoe gave a heavy sigh of relief as she slumped against the carcass of the boar, a hand over her thankful heart. She had not been prepared to return empty-handed, and thus was spared from having to deliver the bad news. She gave a weary smile as she looked back at her dragon, beaming with pride as he hopped back down on all fours and turned to face the ecstatic mouse.

Leave it to Spyro to save the day when all else failed…

Spyro hopped back down into the riverbed and lowered his head down to the elated mother, giving a curious and hopeful croon as he did so; Mrs. Brisby looked up at him with a truly happy expression, her eyes filled with joy and gratitude.

Then something happened that neither dragon, fairy, nor even Rodentkin could've ever predicted was coming:

Spyro froze, dead-still, as he once again experienced the softness of a mouse's fur against him.

Zoe's jaw dropped as she stared in complete and utter disbelief, eyes wide as dinner plates.

And Mrs. Brisby said nothing as she closed the gap between her and her son's savior and hugged the end of his snout as tightly as she could, snuggling him with all the warmth and love a mother could muster for the one who had saved her child.

She rested her head against his snout, closing her eyes to take in the warm embrace. "Thank you *so* much. Truly…*thank you*."

The entire riverbed fell into a frozen silence, broken only by the wind.

Then something hot and wet splashed against the top of her head.

Mrs. Brisby's eyes opened in surprise, and she pulled back from the hug to look up, half-expecting to see that the storm had finally reached them. However, not a single drop of rain was to be seen; the skies were cloudy, yes, but the rain still had yet to fall. She reached up and felt her hair, which was now wet from water rather than spit. She frowned, looking over her wet fingertips in confusion. What was-?

Then she saw them, and her whole world changed at that very moment.

Spyro stared at her in complete silence, his reptilian face as stoic and expressionless as ever…but where his face gave nothing away, his eyes were a much different story…as were the tears running down the grooves of his scales from them; large and heavy, they were spilling from his eyes with no attempt on the dragon's part to fight against them or hide them away to save pride. He just stared at her with rounded, transfixed pupils, as if hypnotized by the most beautiful thing he had ever seen in his life…or, more precisely, moved by the most wonderful thing he had experienced in his life. A mixture of happiness mixed with pain, conflict, and anger towards the world for denying him it for so long.

She knew that look in his eyes. She recognized it now. All the different times where it had compelled her before, *drew* her to him, she now knew why. Because those eyes…those longing, angry, hurt, sorrow-filled eyes… she had seen them before. And not in her own reflection, as that was no longer an accurate comparison. No, she had seen them before in no other than her own children: on that one horrible, *horrible* night not to long ago, when they all had to learn that their father was dead and never coming home.

The eyes of a child who had lost the light that once filled their heart.

Her own eyes widened with realization, and she stepped back in a stumble, her hands covering her mouth in a failed attempt to hide the shocked gasp of horror that escaped her lips.

It all added up together, all the pieces falling into place. His small size. His leaner body. His enlarged features. His silly attitude. His fear at nearly losing her twice. And the eyes that had seen the true horrors of the world, tasted the full bite of pain and injustice that was the worst of life itself, and could only ask one question:

Why?

"You…you're a-"

KRA-KOOOOMMM!!!

Whatever she was about to say was lost to the explosion of thunder that shook the land, a not-so-distant bolt of lightning streaking across the sky like a blaze of heaven fire. Spyro's rounded pupils immediately narrowed into full slits at the sight of the lightning, and he recoiled from Mrs. Brisby's touch, knocking her onto her rear as he stumbled back onto his hind legs and let out an animalistic shriek of fear.

"W-Wait! Easy, *easy*!" Mrs. Brisby cried out as the dragon continued to panic as another thunderclap rang across the horizon. "It's okay! It's not going to-!"

"LOOK OUT!!"

BOOOOM!!

That was all she heard before she was tackled from the side by Zoe, who pushed her out of the way just in time to avoid getting smashed by Spyro's thrashing tail; the stone she was on not a second before was shattered into pebbles by the sheer force of the blow, which sent both mouse and fairy tumbling further across the dirt, the latter using her body to shield the former from the hailstorm of dirt that the dragon's wings kicked up, which were flapping erratically as he attempted to take flight, only to fail.

"We have to go! Now!" Zoe told her, pulling her up to her feet.

Mrs. Brisby tried to resist, her focus on the frightened dragon, who continued to thrash and roar as the thunder continued to roll through the sky.

"B-But he needs help!" She stammered. "We have to-"

But Zoe wouldn't let her approach, scooping her up bridal-style again. "He's too dangerous to approach in this state!" She told her. "There's nothing we can do for him right now; we have to get out of range before we're crushed like insects!"

"But-!"

CRAAASH!!

They looked up to see the dragon falling backwards into the side of the riverbed, roaring mindlessly as he crashed into the same cliff-face he had just pulled the medicine from; the very rock-face split down the middle from the sheer force of the impact, the dragon's numerous dorsal spines digging deep into the solid stone. That was it for Zoe, who quickly took flight and zoomed out of the river with Mrs. Brisby in her arms. For once, Mrs. Brisby paid the heights no mind, her hands clutching Timmy's medicine and her heart reaching for the poor dragon frightened by the approaching storm.

"He's a *dragon*, Miss Mouse, not a furling." Zoe told her firmly, looking her straight in the eye as they gained height. "A *living force of nature*. He can't be approached by mere mortals when he's like this, even if he *needs* us to…" She sighed, shaking her head in her own sadness. "Believe me, I want to help him just as much as you do…but even I know better than to walk into a raging forest fire."

Mrs. Brisby wanted to object, any and all instinct of fear and self-preservation completely overridden by a far more powerful drive she was equally as familiar with. But in the end, all she could do was hugged the envelope and look back, even as they flew away into the forest, at the sight of a mighty, fire-breathing dragon continue to wail and lash out in terror, sounding just like the heart-breaking screams for help from a lost furling in her ears.

For that's *exactly* what he was, she now knew, his cries tearing at her heart and pulling hard at the deepest, strongest, and most primal of instincts within it:

For all his size, and all his power, he was just a furling. A pup. Whatever dragons called their young.

A *Child*.

She was still looking back as they came in for a landing.

Mrs. Brisby had barely acknowledged the fact they had been flying in the first place, her fear of heights all but forgotten in the swirling maelstrom of thoughts that ravaged her mind. She simply braced herself as they dropped down into a clearing within the forest, just on the edge of the Stone's glade; the same where Spyro had encountered Cynthia not so long ago.

And she didn't say anything as Zoe set her down on her feet, simply staring back towards the distant river with a longing look on her face.

"There was nothing you could've done." Zoe stated simply, brushing the dust and gunk from her person as she landed next to the mouse. "Nothing that wouldn't have resulted in you getting accidentally crushed."

"There *should've* been something…" Mrs. Brisby said forlornly, her heart still aching from the pain in those cries. "…*Anything*."

The fairy sighed. "I know…I know it all too well…" She admitted, placing a hand on the mother's shoulder. "But you are just a mouse, and I am just a fairy, whereas he is a *dragon*. Some differences in species are simply too extreme to cross. It would've been suicide to approach him when he's in that state of emotion." She patted her shoulder reassuringly. "What we can do is wait for the storm to pass, and then comfort him afterwards. In the meantime, I believe we have other pressing matters to attend to before it's too late."

That seemed to snap her out of it, and she nodded in agreement, hugging the medicine envelope to her chest. The two then made their way toward the distant shadow of the Lee of the Stone, just as the first drops of rain began to fall.

Never before, in her entire life, had Mrs. Brisby been so happy to see the Lee of the Stone.

Home Sweet Home. Too many times in one day she thought she would never see it again, and part of her wanted to never leave its comforting, protective presence ever again. And hopefully, if all went well, she wouldn't have to for a while.

"I have to admit, as loathe as the dragon fairy within me is to do so: you guys have a pretty good thing going here for yourselves." Zoe commented as she followed the mouse down the main path towards the stone, using her wings as a makeshift umbrella. "The protection of the stone, a sturdy cozy-looking den, rich farming soil, permanent access to water via the river. If I were a mouse, I'd pick this place to build my burrow as well."

Mrs. Brisby smiled warmly at the compliment, a flow of equally-warm memories passing through her mind's eye. "Thank you. Johnathan built it with his own two paws." She told her. "Took a better part of a year, but it was more than worth it."

"And you've been living here for just a bit under a decade, right?"

The mouse nodded, a concerned look crossing her face. "Yes...did my children tell you that?"

"Teresa did. Said you all came here just after Martin was born." Zoe confirmed, arms folded behind her head in causal laid-backness. "You literally just missed us, honestly: we left on a voyage across the sea just one year before. One we've literally just got back from about five days ago."

Well, that explained why she hadn't seen Spyro or his fairy up until now.

"Ten years..." Mrs. Brisby thought aloud. "...that's a long time to be away from home."

Zoe scowled. "Made even longer by the fact that our original purpose of the voyage was a complete waste of time." She snarled bitterly. When the mouse gave her a confused look, she simply waved her off. "It's a long story, I'll tell you about it later, if you want. Just know it doesn't have a happy ending."

Mrs. Brisby nodded. "No...I suppose it doesn't..." She murmured, the image of all those horrible scars flashing through her mind.

The rain had just started to fall in earnest by the time they finally made it under the stone’s cover, where the weather could not touch them; the over-

arching end of the stone served as a natural shelther from the storm, shielding everything beneath it from the elements, very much like a large cave would. This allowed them to relax as they walked up to the front door, which was of a rough design, fashioned out of several stout grass-stakes lashed together with twine, and without any doorknob or handle. Mrs. Brisby stepped forward, reaching to push the door open, when muffled voices from beyond it caught both of their attention.

“…Cast not pearls before swine, I always say, and that includes impudent piglets. Good day!”

They heard some heavy steps marching up to the door, followed by a scream, and then what sounded like a large, water-filled sack tumbling down a flight of stairs. The children's laughter carried all the way up to the door. Sparing each other a confused glance, the two pushed the door open and made their way inside.

The interior of the Brisby home came as quite a surprise to Zoe, who had been expecting a dug-out hole with some straw bedding at best, as that was what most Fae thought of the rodentkin. Instead, the sheer level of civilization and care put into it was amazing: with stone boulders and wooden beams securely reinforcing the earthen walls, and a couple of small, glassless windows providing ventilation, the Brisby home was semi-subterranean, built in a hollowed-out cave underneath the Stone. It was very homely: a massive stone fireplace providing heat and light, the kitchen was furnished with a large, well-scrubbed table, some wooden benches and stools and a dresser filled with earthenware pottery and dishes. The dirt floor was covered in giant rabbit-skin rugs, making the place look most cozy and welcoming. A massive tree root protruding from the floor by the front door had been carved into a flight of stairs, leading down into the kitchen.

This was how the Rodentkin were able to survive both the harsh winters and giant predators native to Nimh: within their subterranean dwellings, built into elaborate underground homes. The perfect shelters for braving the long, freezing winters of these lands.

And it was at the bottom of these stairs that the source of all the commotion was visible. Auntie Shrew was lying in a heap at the foot of the stairs, having tripped on her oversized shawl. The Children were all in differing fits of laughter, from trying to hide it behind their hands to openly pointing and laughing. Zoe had to hold back the urge to laugh at the scene herself. Mrs. Brisby, on the other hand, didn't find it very funny.

"Martin!" She scolded from atop the stairs. "Auntie Shrew, what is going on?"

The rotund shrew rolled over onto her stomach, struggling to get to her feet. "Well! *There* you are, Elizabeth!" She muttered, dusting herself off without looking up. "I've just about had it with that rotten brat you call a son! I have half a mind to-" That when she looked up, and her eyes bugged out with horror. "GOOD *HEAVENS*, CHILD!!"

"Huh?" Mrs. Brisby asked, confused, until she remembered the state she was in. "Oh."

The young mother was, to put it frankly, a complete and utter mess straight out of a nightmare. Spyro may have been able to heal her wounds, but he hadn't been able to mend her clothes or clean her of the mess she was in. Her dress was torn in many places and utterly soaked in blood from the riverbed's corpses, her sleeves and skirt damp with it. The unraveled remains of her bandages still hung from around her head and off her elbows, almost giving her the appearance of a mummy. Were she to play dead, one could mistake her for a mauled corpse.

"I-It's not as bad as it looks! Honest!" She stammered as the old shrew all but flew up the steps to her. "There were these weasels, and-"

"Weasels?!" Auntie Shrew exclaimed, fretting all over the mouse and searching her for any wounds. "How-...you went off the main path, didn't you?" To that, Brisby simply nodded. "Elizabeth, you know the dangers of leaving the path! You could've been killed!"

"I nearly was." Mrs. Brisby admitted, looking away in shame, only for her gaze to turn warm as the memories resurfaced. "But I was saved. By a *truly*

kind creature."

"Is that so?" Auntie Shrew asked, sounding skeptical. "Well, whoever it was, they certainly did it without-" It was then, and only then, did she finally notice Zoe standing in the hallway leading to the door, the fairy's face twisted into an exaggerated smile, and her vision went red. *"...YOU!"*

"Ah, Honeydew!" Zoe cursed aloud before jumping forward, barely missing getting walloped over the head by the old rodent's walking stick.

“Ms. Zoe?!” Teresa exclaimed in surprise as the fairy flew overhead, clearly not expecting their new secret friend to be with their mother. “What are you doing here?!”

“Trying to keep my head on my shoulders!” Zoe called back as she put herself into the inner corner of the roof, clinging to the far wall like a giant moth. Didn’t stop the old shrew from grabbing the nearest cushion from the nearby couch and throwing it at her. “Hey! Watch it!”

“Are you the one responsible for this?!” Auntie Shrew shouted in a fit of fury, chucking another pillow at her. “You fairies and your trickery with wild beasts! I should’ve known this was your doing!” Her next attempt to throw something was halted when Martin clutched onto his arm, using his weight to pull the shrew back.

“Hey, leave her alone!” He snapped. “She didn’t do nuthin’!”

“Get off me, you little brat! We can’t let her get away!” She exclaimed, struggling to pull away from Martin, when Teresa and Cynthia did the same with her other arm, resulting in them all tumbling backwards onto the couch in a big pile of fur, objections, and insults, sending the entire piece of furniture falling backwards with a clatter of wood and a flurry of feather stuffing.

Mrs. Brisby came scampering down the stairs and up to the commotion.

“Stop this, all of you!” she exclaimed as she pulled her children off of her aunt one by one, eventually helping the old shrew to her feet. “Auntie,

please. Miss Zoe is not a threat: she helped me *after* I was attacked by the weasels; I wouldn't have gotten back home if it wasn't for her!" This was partially true, though Mrs. Brisby decided it was probably best not to tell her already-paranoid aunt about the giant dragon that now lurked in the forests around the Stone.

"*Or*, more likely, she used her evil spells on those horrible beasts to trick you into letting her into your home!" Auntie Shrew objected, tapping her walking stick against the floor in reprimand. "I've warned you about Fairy-kind and their devious schemes for years, and you go and let one into your home! Especially after everything this one has done?!"

"For the *last sarding time*, that was all an *accident*!" Zoe snapped from her perch, refusing to come down while the present threat was still in the room. "Unlike you snaring me in your trap and leaving me strung up like a Christmas ham for whatever predator found me!"

That got a scowl of disapproval from Mrs. Brisby. "Auntie…" She chided. "She saved me today, for no reason other than kindness. I trust her."

"Miss Zoe's not a bad fairy." Teresa spoke up. "She didn't do anything wrong."

"That whole thing was an accident." Martin also added.

Cynthia merely nodded in agreement, unsure of what to say.

Seeing that she was fighting a losing battle, the shrew ended up submitting in the end, speaking in a softer, but no less disapproving tone. "I'm not the one in charge of this household, so it isn't my place to dismiss any visitors you let in…" she huffed in defeat. "But I do hope to Frith Above that you know what you're doing, *especially* for the children's sake…ill-mannered brats as they may be." She shot Martin a glare, who stuck his tongue out at her in response.

"As for you, you magical hoodlum!" She addressed Zoe, earning a half-hearted 'Heyyy…' in response to her insult. "If you even so much as think

about trying any of your dirty fairy tricks on this family, I'll see to it that you'll rue the day you got your wings! Do I make myself clear?!"

"Yes, you are extremely loud." Zoe groaned, rolling her eyes, earning a small round of giggles from the furlings.

"Hmph!" The old shrew scoffed, turning her nose up in a huff as she turned back to her niece. "One last thing before I leave you to deal with this ruffian: the first storm of spring has begun, and you know that means Moving Day is at hand. Timmy's sickness may not allow you to take part in it this year, but keep in mind that all Rodentkin are expected to do their part."

"Yes, I'll have everyone ready, just in case."

"See that you do." Auntie Shrew harrumphed. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll prefer to make it to my hole before the rain starts to fall too hard, as another moment with your very odd family will drive me to my wit's end. Good day."

And with that, the old shrew turned and strode out the door in a huff, muttering about disrespectful hooligans, tricksters fairies, and naïve young lady mice along the way. Everyone waited until the door closed before the breath they had collectively been holding was released in a unified sigh of relief.

"No offense to you or your lineage, be it by blood or by adoption…" Zoe quipped as she opened her wings and fluttered down from the high wall, landing next to the mice with an almost dainty flourish. "…but I've encountered *badgers* with more appealing personalities than your aunt."

"Do forgive her, will you?" Mrs. Brisby asked as she put the medicine envelope down on the table. "She might be a bit over-bearing, but she means well..." She then turned a disapproving glare to her children. "… which makes *your* behavior towards her unacceptable. Especially you, Martin."

"She started it!" Martin grumbled, folding his arms.

“That’s no excuse.” Mrs. Brisby stood firm, the mother in her coming into full light. “She only wants to help, and this is a very poor way to repay her for her kindness!” While she rarely lost her temper with them like their father sometimes used to, the disappointment in her voice always got the message across; Martin looked hurt, while Teresa, the least guilty, looked reproachfully at her brother with crossed arms, giving him a stern look of her own.

"I…I'm sorry, Mom." the boy stammered, staring shamefully at the floor.

Mrs. Brisby nodded, before turning her gaze to them all as a whole. “There’s also another issue I’ve been made aware of, thanks to Zoe here.” She told them all, sounding no less disappointed. “You all lied to me and Mr. Ages about Auntie’s trap…and about *Spyro*.”

All three of them looked up in alarm, eyes widening with it.

“You know about Spyro?!” Teresa gasped, looking the most worried out of all of them, though it seemed like it was more worry for the dragon than being caught.

“Yes, I do.” Mrs. Brisby told them sternly, only for her voice to soften. “Because he was the one who saved me from the weasels, and then saved me when I nearly fell to my death.” There was a moment of silence, all three of her children looking at her in a mix of horror, awe, and gratitude. “I know he’s a good dragon and I’m not going to tell anyone about him.” Zoe nodded appreciatively at that. “So, you don’t need to hide anything from me anymore. Alright?”

“…we…we just wanted to keep him safe.” Teresa admitted, head hung in shame.

“We didn’t want anything bad to happen to him.” Martin agreed.

“We needed to keep the bad rats away.” Cynthia spoke up, repeating what her siblings had told her.

That got Mrs. Brisby's attention, making her blink in surprise. "Bad rats? What bad rats?"

"The one's who want to hurt the sad purple monster." Cynthia told her.

"She means Ratdom as a whole." It was Zoe who spoke up this time, bending down to pick up the blonde-furred furling in a gentle hold. "The same ones that we fairies closed our borders from to begin with: if word ever got out that a real live dragon was on Nimh, everyone would try to hunt him down and slay him." She gave Cynthia a gentle squeeze, earning a small chirp of delight from the young mouse. "I, for one, am thankful to you all for not telling anyone about him, and hope you continue to keep this secret."

"It…it wouldn't be as bad as that." Mrs. Brisby tried to object, though deep down she knew otherwise.

"Yes, it would." Zoe quipped without missing a beat, giving the mother a knowing stare. "But I digress. I believe we have a sick furling to tend to."

Mrs. Brisby's eyes went wide. "Oh goodness, Timothy!"

Without another word, she scurried over to the fireplace, where a kettle with warm water was hanging over. She reached for a rag to pick it up with, only to grimace as the blood-soaked end of her torn sleeve ran across the tabletop, leaving a long smear of blood across its surface. She barely had time to recoil in disgust, not even sure she could touch the medicine without dirtying it when another hand (one without fur or claws) picked up the rag for her.

"I'll make the broth." Zoe told her, wiping her hands clean with the rag, leaving them spotless. "You go clean yourself up so you can give it to your son without making him even sicker."

The mouse nodded, muttering her thanks before she left for the washroom. The moment she left, Zoe got to work; using a fresh rag than the one she wiped her hands with, she took the kettle with one hand and brought it to the table, using her other hand to hold a bowl in place. Teresa, Martin, and

Cynthia gathered around, watching with anxious stares as the fairy poured the water into the bowl before setting the kettle down away.

“Pass me the medicine, Martin.” Zoe asked with an out-held hand, as the second-oldest siblings was the closest to where it was. Martin nodded and dutifully handed her the envelope, taking care to keep it upright so it wouldn’t spill. Zoe nodded her thanks as she took the envelope and opened it, reaching a slim hand inside to scoop up about half-a-handful of the herb mixture. “Three weeks. Mr. Ages made enough medicine to last for at least three weeks.” She told the three as she sprinkled the mixture into the bowl, using a wooden spoon to slowly stir it into a proper broth. “That’s how long it will take for Timothy to get better.”

“But Moving Day will be coming to Dapplewood soon.” Teresa objected; she recalled how excited Timothy had been about this year, being the first he was finally old enough to help the grownups with it. “This was going to be his first year participating in the moving.”

Zoe shook her head. “I’m sorry, but he’s going to have to miss it until next year.” The fairy told her. “Trust me when I say Pneumonia’s not a disease to take lightly: he has to stay warm and bundled up in bed for at least three weeks, no going outside whatsoever, as breathing the cold air will only make it worse, you all understand? Your mom’s counting of all of you to help keep your brother safe.”

All three of them nodded in agreement, their friend’s words cementing their duty to their family members in their minds and hearts alike.

Mrs. Brisby returned just as Zoe finished preparing the broth. The mouse was looking much better than she had been a few minutes before, having washed herself thoroughly and having exchanged her soaked dress and cloak for a simple white nightgown. No trace of any of the horror or gore of the day beforehand was visible, leaving her looking as clean and untouched as the morning she left for the ruins.

“It’s ready.” She told her, placing the spoon on the edge of the bowl before handing it to her.

“Thank you so much.” Mrs. Brisby said gratefully, taking the bowl in both hands. “Will you come? Just in case we need something more?”

Zoe nodded, and she followed the family of mice through a doorway obscured by a curtain, entering what was clearly the children's bedroom. Four roughly carved, child-sized beds with rabbit skin duvets were the main focus of the room, the walls decorated with painted flowers. There were some homemade toys sitting on shelves, a round rabbit-skin rug in the middle of the dirt floor, and a small fireplace providing light and heat. It truly testified to the meagre means of living most Rodentkin had, their abodes nowhere near as nice or luxurious as those of the Fae.

And yet, there was something…homely about it all. It wasn’t much, but it was all theirs at the same time. That brought a small smile to the fairy’s face.

And there, sleeping fitfully in the bed next to the large glass window that allowed a view of the outside world, was the only member of this little family that Zoe hadn’t met yet.

Much like Cynthia, Timothy’s fur was a single shade of sandy-blonde, no highlights or other markings to be seen. Unlike his sister, however, who was a healthy weight and roundness for her age, he looked terribly frail, very thin, and overall small for a mouse his age. Even his younger sister was larger than he was in terms of overall mass. He laid there, bundled up in several blankets, but still shivering from the cold. His breath was weak and shallow, as if he was unable to cough out the fluids building in his lungs.

A sight that struck a cord within Zoe that she would rather forget.

Mrs. Brisby sat down on a stool she had set up next to the bed, between it and the window, and tenderly stroked her son’s damp hair. “Timmy, wake up, dear.” She whispered gently, just enough to rouse the child from slumber. Timothy's heavy eyes opened just a bit, and he had no strength to greet his mother, other than a weak smile of recognition. “I've brought some medicine for you. It will make you feel better.” Timothy was unable to say anything, but he was able to drink the broth as Mrs. Brisby spoon-fed it to him.

After what felt like an eternity of a day, Timothy was finally getting his medicine, taking the first much-needed step towards recovery.

Zoe knelt down on the opposite side of the bed from Mrs. Brisby, giving the furling between them a look over. She placed her fingers against his neck to feel his pulse, only to find it racing like a steam engine. Running her hand across his forehead, it felt as hot as a boiling kettle.

“Teresa, Martin, bring me some cold water and some towels from the kitchen.” The fairy instructed the two siblings, who had been waiting outside the doorway to the bedroom. “It will help the medicine bring his fever down.” Without questioning the odd request, Teresa hurried back to the kitchen to get the water as instructed, with Martin assisting her in carrying the towels. When they returned, Zoe took the bowl of water from Teresa and set it on the bedside table, taking a towel from Martin and dipping it into it. She let it soak for a few seconds before she pulled it out and wrung out the excess water, folding the damp cloth and taking it to Timmy’s forehead.

“What are you doing?” Mrs. Brisby asked cautiously.

“Applying cold water to the forehead will help soothe the effects of the fever.” Zoe said without looking up, gently dabbing the sweat from the boy’s forehead.

“Are you an angel?”

Everyone fell into a stunned silence as a weak voice managed to speak out, and all eyes fell on Timothy; his glazed-over eyes were somewhat focused on the fairy, no doubt still in a state of delirium from the fever. Zoe herself looked the most surprised of all, but not because the boy spoke; rather it was what she had been called that had caught her quite off-guard.

There was a moment of tense silence, an uncertain air filling the room.

Then Zoe gave a sad smile.

“No.” She told him as she continued to work, applying another towel to his forehead, soothing his fever just a touch. “I’ve been many things in my life, but an angel will never be one of them.”

Timothy continued to stare at the fairy in his state of semi-consciousness. “Who…who are you?”

“A friend.” Was all Zoe told him.

Mrs. Brisby reached over and kissed her son's cheek, trying to reassure him. “She’s someone who's going to make you feel better, Timmy.” She reassured him lovingly. “You just try and go back to sleep, darling.” Once Timothy had finished eating his medicine, the two then helped the boy swallow some water so he wouldn’t dehydrate. At that point, there was nothing more left to do but wait and hope that Mr. Ages remedy worked, as they usually did, with the young furling falling back into a much more restful slumber.

“Off to bed with you all, now.” Mrs. Brisby whispered to the rest of her children; it was the end of a long day for the whole family.

And only Frith knew what tomorrow would bring for them all.

Chapter 13: Love Begins This Way

Notes:

> This chapter is an extended version of the previous one combined with what was going to be the next chapter. Just another case of combining linked parts together into single pieces, rather than trying to force out a way to have both at the same time.

Chapter Text

It was nice to spend the night in front of a fire, for once.

Zoe sat at the table in the kitchen, waiting for Mrs. Brisby to return from putting her children to bed, watching the fireplace with a relaxed expression. She had undressed down to her bodice and her bloomers, having laid her dress over one of the chairs; both parts of her undergarments were a rosy pink in color and left her insectile midriff exposed, revealing the gold carapace that wrapped around her waist like a natural corset of armor. She watched the flames dance before her, as if hypnotized by their primordial tongues lashing through the air.

However, her mind was focused on a different sight, one that hadn't left her head the moment it had taken place: the sight of Mrs. Brisby openly hugging Spyro's snout back in the river, no fear in her body or heart whatsoever. The scene played in loop in her head, over and over again; had been ever since she had witnessed it…something she wouldn't have believed, had she not seen it with her own eyes.

For it was *impossible*.

The Rodentkin were afraid of everything with sharp teeth. That was a law of nature that even their enlightenment hadn't changed; being on the bottom of the food chain, the only way rodents could survive was to fear everything that even had the potential to harm them. They did not survive the Era of

Titans and beyond it by playing it stupid; whenever something showed its sharp teeth, they fled and hid. That was how it had always been.

And dragons were among the largest and sharpest of teeth; the last remaining Titans of that long-forgotten age, the flame that devoured all. They and they alone sat upon the throne at the top of the food chain, a place that even humans and other sapient races were never able to reach, despite their delusions otherwise. The mere sight alone was enough to send even the largest and bravest of beasts fleeing for their lives, let alone their draconian presence amplifying all forms of fear they instilled in the hearts of all in range.

She knew that the mother mouse (Elizabeth, if she remembered what the old shrew had said) had felt the presence of the world's greatest threat. She *surely* must have. No one could get that close to Spyro without doing so. And being Rodentkin, that should've been more than enough to kill her on the spot from sheer fright, let alone send her running for the hills.

And yet, despite all of this, it happened: she outright embraced the young dragon as if he was one of her own, with no fear in her heart whatsoever, defying *everything* Zoe knew about the very order of nature itself.

And with that act, the Idea had been born.

It was a *stupid* idea. Perhaps the stupidest idea ever conceived in the long, *long* history of stupid ideas. When it first popped into her head, she immediately dismissed it out of sheer ridicule of it; it was outright laughable, what it was suggesting…but the more she tried to force it away, to abandon it entirely, the more it kept creeping its way back into her mind. Each time she tossed it out, it clung even harder than before when it returned. And the more she saw Elizabeth tend to her own children, the more the idea began to seem less and less stupid.

At this point, it was a matter of two questions: what other alternatives did they have, and what harm could come in the long run from trying?

And both had the same answer.

The very faint sound of footsteps behind her drew her attention from the flames; she turned just in time to see Elizabeth exiting the children's bedroom, putting out the candle to the room as she did so.

"I finally got them to go to sleep." She whispered as she approached, letting the curtain fall closed behind her. "My goodness, they were asking so many questions about you. I think they like you."

Zoe gave a small huff of a laugh. "We fairies have a natural thing for being good with kids." She stated simply. "Although I will say, my experience with kids tend to lean toward big, scaly ones with a breath as fiery as their temper."

Elizabeth giggled at that, making her way past the fairy to the cupboard; she took out a jug of some sweet-smelling beverage resembling wine, bringing it to the table, where she poured it into two wooden mugs, offering one to Zoe, who took it with a nod of thanks. The two then made their way towards the fireplace and made themselves comfortable on the soft rabbit-skin hearthrugs, where Zoe sampled a sip of her mug; it was simple and plain, unlike the fancy wines made by fae hands, but it was a nice beverage that warmed her stomach, nonetheless.

She glanced up above the fireplace, where a large painted portrait of the mouse family hung over the mantelpiece for all the room to see; a portrait of them sitting amongst the flowers before what must've been the recently completed home, the Lee of the Stone visible in the background. She recognized Elizabeth, who was several months pregnant in the image, along with a much younger Teresa, Martin, and Timothy gathered around, all with big smiles on their faces. There was also a handsome male mouse sitting next to her, with greyish fur much like Martin's, his hand entwined with hers while he bounced a toddler Timothy on his knee.

"I take it that's the Mr. Mouse in your life." Zoe stated, motioning her mug to the portrait.

Elizabeth nodded, her smile fading a touch. "My husband, Johnathan." She told her, her voice quiet. "He passed away just last fall, during a summons from King Nicodemus."

Zoe cocked at eyebrow at that: what kind of mouse must her husband be to be personally summoned by the King of the Rats himself? “So I heard from your aunt, when she berated me for playing tricks on a 'recently widowed mother of four'…my condolences for your loss, for what little that must be worth.”

“Thank you.” Elizabeth whispered, taking a small sip of her wine. “It hasn't been easy, coming to terms with his death…and I fear for our future, now that he’s not here to lead the harvest.” Her smile turned a touch warmer, a warm look of love filling her saddened eyes. “But my children have helped me greatly with my grief.”

The fairy remained silent at first, eyeing the way she glowed at the mention of her children. “…You truly love your kids very much.”

Mrs. Brisby smiled warmly, the smiling faces in the portrait increasing the warmth within her heart; a very familiar sensation to the young mother. “More than anything in the world. They’re the light of my life. I don’t know where I would be without them.”

Zoe nodded in agreement. “I am somewhat familiar with such feelings, thought the circumstances are a little…*different*.” she stated, looking back at the dancing flames of the fireplace. “As a dragon fairy, my dragon is my purpose of existence. His will is my purpose, and that comes with a natural bias towards devotion.” She smiled warmly, which glowed much in the same manner her own had. “But you’ve witnessed first-hand how kind Spyro is. Even with my magical bond, it’s hard not to fall in love with such a pure soul, in spite of what he is.”

A pure soul, in spite of what he was. That was a good way of putting it; of describing what Spyro was like. Large and fearsome to behold but possessing a warm heart under those amethyst scales.

“A Dragon Fairy…I’ve never heard of that kind of fairy before.” She stated, taking a small sip of her wine as she eyed Zoe curiously. “Is that why you have horns like he does?”

“Yep.” Zoe said with a nod. “And it makes sense you haven’t heard of my kind before, because I’m the first of my kind to appear on Nimh in centuries. Dragon Fairies are fairies that are either born as or chosen among normal fae to become a Dragon’s Familiar.” She gave her a questioning look. “Are you familiar with the concept?”

Mrs. Brisby nodded. “They’re like a wizard’s magical pet or servant?”

“Simply put but correct.” Zoe told her. “It is our very purpose, our duty, our very reason for existence to serve Dragonkind as their companions and servants. In my case, I was born an Autumn Fairy but became a Dragon one when Spyro chose me to become his familiar when I was a child.” She tapped the base of one of her horns with her finger. “I wasn’t born with these: they magically grew from my head when I first accepted the bond between us. The symbol of my eternal bond of servitude to my master.”

“Oh…I see.” The mouse murmured into her drink, a little unsure of what to make of that; the way Zoe spoke of it made it sound like she was more a *slave* to the dragon than anything else, and yet she seemed completely happy with that arrangement. “And you’re happy being his ‘familiar’?”

To that, Zoe’s smile faded, her eyes going dark.

“More than you can *possibly* imagine.” The fairy said with absolute certainty and resolve, her words as hard and unbreakable as steel. “I know what you’re thinking: isn’t being a Familiar the same as being magically-enslaved to someone? Whether it is or not, I couldn’t tell you, but if it is, then I tell you this: I gladly accept the life of a slave to a kind master like Spyro over the life I had before I met him.”

A heavy silence followed that statement, the mouse unsure of what to say to that, if anything.

The fairy then blinked, her dark aura disappearing almost instantly, as if she suddenly realized how that sounded. She coughed into her fist, awkwardly breaking the ice by continuing on. “W-Well, that being said, it’s not always an easy life, let me tell you.” She stammered, trying to force the conversation back into a friendlier mood. She then scowled again, though

this time out of annoyance. “Mostly in part thanks to the sheer *arrogance* of my fellow Fae. Especially the idiot council!” She snapped bitterly. “I swear, for every step of progress I take forward with helping Spyro what he needs in life, those nectar-drunk fools drag us back ten-fold, always forcing their ideas of what they think is best on us without any chance for us to say otherwise! Acting as if they have *any* idea what it means to raise a force of nature given flesh…as if my horns mean *nothing*!” She took a hearty swing from her mug, downing as much of the alcoholic beverage as she could swallow in one go, gasping for breath afterwards. *“Arogan ag òl eabar, ag òl gu h-ìosal...”*

Mrs. Brisby wasn’t sure what that meant, but she knew foul language when she heard it, and was glad she had chosen to speak it in a language the children wouldn’t understand, had they heard her outbursts.

“Ah…Apologies for all that.” Zoe coughed, clearing her throat awkwardly. “I tend to let my emotions speak themselves when not appropriate.”

“O-Oh, It’s no problem.” She assured her, smiling a bit; she knew what that was like, after all. “We all have things we need to get off our chests sometimes.”

Zoe smirked and raised her mug. “Well, thanks for being a gracious host in that regard, Mrs…Elizabeth, was it? I don’t believe we’ve been officially introduced.” She lifted her head back, gulping down the last of her wine.

“O-Oh, yes. It’s Elizabeth Brisby.”

PPFFFFFFFTTTTTT!!!

The mouse jumped as the fairy suddenly choked on her drink and wrenched forward, eyes wide and cheeks bulging with a truly powerful spit-take, spraying an arch of wine through the air. She was left coughing violently, struggling to catch her breath as the red fluid ran down her chin. Mrs. Brisby reached for Zoe, fretting over the ailing fairy. “Oh, my goodness, are you alright?!”

“*Brisby*?!” Zoe wheezed between coughs, looking at her with a truly shocked expression, despite her coughing fit. “As in Johna-…Johnathan! You said your husband was called Johnathan, right?!”

Mrs. Brisby blinked, confused. “Why yes. He was my husband.” She told her, unsure of what to make of such a reaction to her late husband. “Johnathan Brisby.”

Zoe stared at her, eyes wide with disbelief. Then she stood up and studied the family portrait, namely Johnathan, to see if what she had learned was true.

And sure enough, it was.

“Holy shit...*holy shit*!” She exclaimed as she turned back to the thoroughly-confused Mrs. Brisby, as if confronted with the most mind-blowing news in all of history. “You’re…and your kids…Frith above, I’m in the home of and talking to the wife of THE Johnathan Brisby!”

Now it was Mrs. Brisby’s turn to look surprised. “You know Johnathan?”

“Know him?! Lady, there isn’t a soul alive, be they Fae or Rodentkin, who doesn’t know that name! Your husband’s a famous hero!” The fairy explained, motioning with grand, exaggerated hand motions as she spoke, as if trying to emphasize just how big this news was through body language. “Surely you must know about his exploits! The Sealing of the Unspoken One! The War against Efrafa! He was your husband, for crying out lo-!”

She froze, a cold chill going down her spine.

“…*was* your husband…” She muttered numbly, as if the very world had been pulled out from under her feet. “Johnathan Brisby…is *dead*?”

Elizabeth winced as the confusion was replaced with an all-too familiar and all-too great pain, squeezing her eyes shut as she braced against the ache in her heart. Afraid that she was going to cry if she spoke, all she could do was nod in confirmation.

“I’m sorry.” Was all Zoe could bring herself to say, still struggling to come to terms with the fact herself.

“You did nothing wrong.” Mrs. Brisby managed to whisper, dabbing at her eyes with her sleeve; one tear managed to escape and roll down her snout, dripping off the end of her whisker. “It just…*hurts*.”

Zoe didn’t say anything, looking off to the side in regret. She retook her seat on the rug next to the sniffling mouse, staring into the fireplace with a downcast expression. A moment of silence passed before the fairy decided to speak again.

“Your husband was a great mouse.” She told her softly. “He did many great things and changed the lives of many on Nimh for the better.” She gave a soft smile. “He was Spyro’s personal hero as a youngling: Spyro grew up on the stories of his adventures and wants to become just like him when he grows up…his tales of heroism made my dragon’s life that much brighter, and for that he has my eternal gratitude and respect.”

A soft sob escaped Elizabeth’s lips, but she smiled with gratitude herself, all the same.

“Thank you…” She murmured, wiping the remaining unshed tears from her eyes. “…I-I knew he has some standing in the Rat Kingdom, since he worked for Nicodemus and all, but he never told me much about his life before the war.”

Zoe shrugged. “I’m sure his reasons were good ones.” She stated simply. “We all have parts of our lives we’d rather forget…still, it’s just…*wow*.” She breathed as she looked around her, now seeing this humble, little home in a much different light. Then the thought reached her, and she snapped her fingers in confirmation. “*That’s* why he settled down in our lands! He was one of the only Rodentkin to be welcomed into Feywild following the closing of the borders, thanks to his history with our people! It’s the perfect place to get away from all the potential dangers of being a ‘famous adventurer turned family man’, such as old enemies trying to hurt your wife and kids for revenge or something.”

“So he brought us out here to protect us.” Mrs. Brisby said sadly, looking longingly at her husband’s image in the portrait. “Oh, Johnathan…”

“Still, out of all the places he could’ve set up shop in, it just had to be under Spyro’s stone.” Zoe chuckled, shaking her head in amusement. “Imagine what it would’ve been like had you guys shown up here just a few days earlier; just a few days before we left for the realms.” She chuckled to herself. “I can just picture him now: half his current size and having a crazy fan-attack over meeting his hero in person. He’d be popcorning all throughout the forest.”

That brought forth a bubble of laughter from Mrs. Brisby, and she couldn’t help but giggle at the mental image of the awe-inspiring dragon, mighty and ferocious, bouncing around and chirping like an excited furling in front of her bewildered husband.

Like a furling...

“How old is he?”

Zoe gave pause, looking at the mouse in confusion. “Excuse me?”

“Spyro. The Dragon.” Mrs. Brisby repeated, shifting her mug nervously in her hands. “How old is he? He doesn’t ‘feel’ like an adult; the way he looks and the way he acts is very…youthful.” She looked up to the fairy with concerned eyes. “Is he…young?”

It was a question she felt that she already knew the answer to but needed to hear for herself.

An answer she was honestly dreading to hear, because if she was right…

Zoe remained quiet for a moment, contemplating the answer, before she ultimately spoke: “That’s a little tricky to answer, due to how dragons age.” she told her, pouring herself another mug’s worth of wine. “As I said before, we found him just hatched out the egg about fifty years ago, but you see: Dragons have incredibly long lifespans, and thus age at a much slower rate than mortals do. In terms of counting how many winters he’s endured,

he would be fifty in a mortal lifespan…which, in terms of dragon growth, would make him about…" She paused, thinking it over silently, before deciding on a truly horrifying answer:

"Ten years old. Probably younger than your eldest furling, Teresa."

Ten. Years. Old.

Younger than Teresa. Not that much older than Martin.

A furling dragon, just as she suspected.

Covered in scars.

A sick feeling of horrified revulsion filled Mrs. Brisby chest as the thought rose in her mind like a dark cloud of icy cold: a child no older than her own, bearing the signs of wounds that only the most savage of wars could inflict in the first place, let alone the sheer number obtained by one creature. For a youngling of that age to possess any kind of wound from claw or blade, regardless of the fact he was a dragon…

She now knew why his eyes held such sorrow, for they were the eyes of a child who had been opened to reality: those of someone who had experienced the true cruelty of the world long before they had any right to.

A child robbed of their innocence.

"Allow me to tell you a story, before I turn in for the night." Zoe said softly, her gaze downcast. "A story about one Spyro the Dragon, and his thankless adventures in the Dragon Realms…

Spyro hatched in a small cave located in the Crystal Mountains of Feywild. No one knew how his egg got there; there were no signs of any dragons living in the area, and not even signs of a previous nest. His egg had just been sitting there, on the cold stone floor, with no sign of the parents anywhere. Many believe it was the work of thieves, trying to hide their

goods, but others say that the parents abandoned the egg once they saw what color it was.

Yes, the color. For you see, Spyro is no ordinary dragon; surely, you've felt it for yourself. Even by dragon standards, no other dragon his age possesses such a powerful presence. That is because Spyro is a special breed of Elder Dragon born only once every ten generations: the 'Aetherian Safi'jiiva'…or as most mortals call them, the Purple Dragon. Whereas most dragons can breathe and wield a single element in their entire life, the Purple Dragon has the in-born gift to wield ALL the Dragon Elements at once. Fire, Ice, Lightning, Earth, Water, Wind, Light, Shadow, and so many more. This makes them one of the most powerful non-Titan beasts to ever soar the skies…and to many, the most dangerous creature to ever walk the earth.

But to the Fairies of Feywild, he was a gift from the Hollow itself. King Oberon saw his discovery as the destiny of his people foretold: he believes that Spyro's birth was their chance to finally redeem Fairy-Kind from the sins of the past and bring forth a new era of peace and cleansing to not just Nimh, but all of Tamrizeroth. All that was needed was to make sure Spyro grew up nurtured in an environment that encouraged him to become good and just, unlike the previous purple dragons before. So, he made a home for the young dragon here on Nimh, within the palace of Avalon itself, and closed off the borders of his kingdom to all who could potentially threaten him, even his former allies.

However, for all their efforts, the Fairies were falling short of what it meant to care for a dragon. Yes, they gave him all the food and shelter he needed, an extensive education that he could understand, and training with the elements they could provide, such as Nature, Light, and Magic, but even under the king's guidance there's only so much the tiny fairy-people can do for a beast of Spyro's size, power, and needs. Spyro had no one to truly form an emotional bond with; someone to imprint on and develop the necessary life skills and sense of empathy needed to exist in a world where Elder Dragons did not roam; his Dragon Fairy, his only form of truly-bonded companionship, was still no more than a mere Familiar, the lesser to his greater, and thus he was left in a world with no one to look up to.

It was clear they needed to try something else, and when the young dragon reached 40 mortal years of age, they decided on a plan: to send Spyro across the sea to the Dragon Realms, where he could be taken in and raised properly by his own kind.

When Spyro arrived in the realms, he was first taken in by the Elemental Guardians, four wise dragons that held mastery over the elements, and perhaps the only dragons in the entire realm to accept him. Over the course of a year, they trained him further in the arts of the Elements, teaching him to master Fire, Ice, Lightning, and Earth. The Fire Guardian, Ignitus, saw the potential in King Oberon's plan, and between days of training he would take Spyro to the different tribes of Dragons across the realms, hoping to find a female that would be willing to become his surrogate mother and raise him as her own.

His hopes, however, were all in vain.

Unlike the Guardians, the dragons of the realms knew only fear and spite for the purple dragon, due to the destruction and death the previous member of his species had wrought upon their lands. They viewed Spyro as another potential monster in the making and feared him as much as they did his predecessor. No matter which tribe they went to, no matter how much Spyro attempted to appeal to his own kind, he was met with rejection every single time, sometimes violently.

Yes. A few of those scars on his body were inflicted by the most violent of females; namely those with hatchlings of their own, who felt them threatened by his mere presence. In the end, there was none among any of the Five Tribes willing to take him in as their own, and he was cast out by all their elders.

Then, as if that wasn't enough, the Gnorcs attacked.

What are Gnorcs? They are large, orc-like creatures with bright-green skin, large tusks, and violent tempers. And Gnasty Gnorc, leader of the horde, was the most foul-tempered of all: for no other reason than petty insult, he cast a curse across the lands that turned all dragons into green crystal

statues, leaving them powerless as the Gnorc Hordes invaded their lands, destroyed their homes, and raided them of their food and treasure.

The only dragon in all the realms that had not been transformed by the curse was Spyro, for his own magical power was greater than Gnasty's, to the degree that his mere touch was enough to break the curse over other dragons and free them from their prisons of crystal. Thus, Spyro came up with an idea: if he could free his other dragons and put an end to Gnasty Gnorc's reign over the Dragon Realms, he would prove himself a hero just like the legendary Johnathan Brisby. And then the other dragons would see that he was good and accept him as one of their own.

For Ten Years he embarked on this 'adventure' across the five realms, with only his faithful Dragon Fairy to accompany him. Ten Years of fighting off wave upon wave of gnorcs and other such monsters and freeing dragons scattered all over the world. Ten Years of enduring the horrors of a one-man war against an entire horde, tasting the blow of blade, spike, club, flame, lightning, acid, and so much more, all in the name of being the hero and earning his place amongst Dragon-Kind.

And despite all the pain he endured…all the horrors he faced by himself… all the nights spent wondering if he would live to see the sunrise…he won. He eventually freed all the dragons and defeated Gnasty Gnorc once and for all. He had done it. He had slain the bad guys, he had freed dragon kind, he had literally saved their entire world.

And they still cast him out.

If anything, his exploits only made them even more afraid: a single pup, not even half the size of a fully-grown adult, capable of destroying the entire Gnorc horde all by himself? It terrified them to no end. Even after everything he had done for them, many of them still cried out for his banishment…and just as many others called for his death.

It was not to be, though: Ignitus and the other Dragon Guardians, along with a small group of dragons that had come to favor him over his adventures, managed to sneak the young dragon out of the realms and back onto the ship that had taken him there all those years ago. By the time the

Elders realized what had happened, and the guards sent out to obtain him, it was too late. Left with no choice, the Elders officially declared Spyro banished to exile on Nimh, the very land he was born, never to set foot on the soil of the Dragon Realms again, under pain of death.

The last anyone ever saw of that young, misunderstood dragon was his ship disappearing over the horizon...

…until he would arrive back to the land that he had left so long ago, a broken, scar-covered shell of his former self, his very world laying shattered at his feet." She finished. "And you know the rest."

Zoe leaned in to take another drink of her beverage, her throat dry from her tale, when she heard it; the soft, sharp hiccup of a gasp. She looked up just in time to see Mrs. Brisby drop her mug, spilling its contents across the floor, and grasp at her chest with both paws; she was outright gasping for breaths between the heavy sobs that spilled from her, accompanied by the large tears rolling down her face and dripping off her whiskers. It looked as if she was dying from sheer heartbreak.

Heartbreak of a mother for the suffering of a child.

"Are you okay?" Zoe asked, rightfully alarmed at the display.

"Why?" The mouse whimpered in a voice that was equal parts pleading and accusing. "He's just a *boy*…all those *scars*…his eyes…*why*?"

The fairy stared at her for a moment before giving a heavy sigh.

"Because the world does not forgive the son for the sins of the father." She said with complete contempt in her voice. "Simple as."

"It's so unfair…so *wrong*." Mrs. Brisby sniffled, still clutching her chest as the pain continued to gnaw at her heart. She looked up with pleading eyes, not even trying to hold the tears back anymore. "No child should *ever* have to look at the world like he does."

“I agree.” Was all Zoe could say, taking one long, deep drink of her wine. “But at least one soul weeps for his suffering…and for that, *you* have my eternal gratitude as well.”

Mrs. Brisby would’ve scoffed if her throat wasn’t so tight from all the sobbing. What could mere gratitude do for a child that had suffered for so long?

“What do you plan to do now?” She finally worked up the strength to ask, wiping the wetness from her eyes and face.

To that, Zoe shrugged. “Honestly, I’m not sure.” She admitted, setting her mug on the floor next to her. “When we first arrived home, the first thing Spyro wanted to do was to come back to the Lee of the Stone, once of his favorite places in all of Feywild. But that plan hit a road-block when we found you here instead.” She gazed into the flames, the light reflecting in her eyes. “He’s not going to force you to leave; he wants you to have your home, but with the Stone gone, there’s not much reason to stay, but we also have no reason to leave either. We’re kinda stuck on what to do now.”

Elizabeth sighed sadly, the image of the dragon’s tearful expression playing on loop in her mind’s eye.

Spyro…his story was truly a tragic one. A hatchling who was born into a land far from his own, cursed with the color and power he never asked for, and doomed to carry the name of a lineage that the world as a whole feared. Whose only companions sought to use him as a means for their own ends, regardless of how benevolently they treated him or not. Who, despite everything he had done to prove himself more than just another monster of the dark, had still ultimately been cast out by his own kind, forced to return to the world that was never his.

Shunned by Dragon-Kind, objectified by Fae-Kind, and was going to be feared by Rodent-kind when they learned of his existence.

A soul who truly had no one to turn to. No one to take him under their wing and tell him it was all going to be okay.

She hadn’t meant to make him cry; she had been just so happy to get Timmy’s medicine back, and so grateful to the one who had made that possible, that she hadn’t even realized she had hugged his snout until a moment later. Not that she *hadn’t* meant to do such a thing either, though. He had saved not only her life, but had saved Timmy’s life as well, all in one day. If it wasn’t for him, she would’ve been devoured by those weasels, her children made orphans, and both she and Timmy would be joining Johnathan within the Tree of Life…well, as least Timmy would have. Horrible as it sounded to think, she doubted that someone who would’ve failed her family so much deserved to join them in a happy afterlife.

Which only made Spyro’s selfless acts of kindness all the more important to her.

She wanted to return the favor…to return said kindness that had been shown. He deserved it, especially after all these years; he had done so much for the world as a whole and received nothing but spite for his actions. It was long about time he finally got something in return.

But there was little she, a small, mortal mouse like herself, could give to a mighty dragon...

...but perhaps, there was something she could *share*.

Something that was originally his so long ago:

“He could stay here.” She offered. “With us.”

The fairy looked at Mrs. Brisby with a surprised expression, though inwardly the Idea was starting to take root with those very words. “You’re not afraid that he might harm you or your kids?”

But the mouse simply shook her head ‘no’. “If he was going to harm my children, he would’ve done so when they first met. But he didn’t.” She stated. “If anything, I think he’s helped them: when Johnathan died, we all felt lost, empty, with little to look forward to but worry for the future…but Spyro…he’s given them some of their past joy back just by being there for them. Their days are happier and full of more laughter than they were a

week ago, and now I know I have him to thank for that." She then wrung her hands nervously. "Besides, there's also the upcoming harvests: with Johnathan gone, there's no one to provide the strength needed to farm the corn. If he's willing to help, I would be more than happy to accept it."

Zoe rubbed her chin in thought. "Hmmmm…Spyro's elements of Earth and Nature *could* be used for farming, if he's inclined to use his powers for such things." She then gave Mrs. Brisby a serious look. "But the question truly is: can *you* accept him? *Truly*? You are Rodentkin. Rodentkin are mortal and fearful of all with sharp teeth, and a dragon's teeth are very, *very* sharp. Can you *honestly* look upon those teeth, and all the blood that drips from them, and say that you will not be afraid?"

There was a brief moment of silence before Elizabeth gave her answer in the most simple and honest way possible:

"I can."

It was said with such truth that Zoe was truly caught off guard, her eyes wide in surprise. She stared at Brisby for a while, unsure of what to make of this brave-yet-timid mouse, before ultimately chuckling to herself.

"Truly the wife of Johnathan Brisby…" She muttered aloud, before turning back to her. "It'll ultimately be up to Spyro whether or not we'll be staying, with he the master and I the familiar, after all. If this is what you truly want, you'll have to speak to him about it in the morning."

Mrs. Brisby nodded in agreement, standing up and dusting herself off. "Shall I show you to the guest chambers?"

To that, however, Zoe simply shook her head.

"I appreciate the offer, but I can't stay." She said as she stood up herself.

The mouse blinked in surprise. "You're *leaving*? But it's dark out, and the storm is still going."

“And Spyro’s in the middle of it, with no one else to ride it out with.” Zoe told her as she made her way to the kitchen table, taking her dress off the back of the chair and slipping it up over herself. “Don’t worry about the storm. We have a shelter nearby: in the old wolf’s den by the riverbank.”

Mrs. Brisby knew of the den she was talking about; it had been a moment of concern for her when she and Johnathan first moved here, but he assured her that it had been abandoned a long time ago. And sure enough, in all the years she lived here she hadn’t seen a single wolf in these parts. It would make the perfect shelter for a dragon of the same size as one, though she couldn’t imagine it to be a very warm place to ride out a storm in.

She could just picture it. The poor beast, young and alone, huddled up in a dusty old cave in the middle of the raging winds and pouring rain.

“Let me come with you.”

It was almost comical: the way Zoe’s head popped out of the neck of her dress like a jack-in-the-box, her eyes wide with surprise. “Excuse me?”

“I want to help.” She explained, holding her paws against her chest. “He’s done so much for me and my family...He saved my life, he saved Timmy’s life, he saved us all and he’s out *there*…in *that*…with no one.”

“You sure you want to go out there with me?” Zoe asked, not entirely sure it was a wise idea. “What about your kids?”

“It’ll only be for a little while. I just want to speak to him.” Mrs. Brisby told her, shaking her head to fight off any form of reluctance that lingered in her mind. “I-I can help him…*Please…*”

The fairy remained silent for a while, watching her mousey friend with a conflicted gaze as she finished dressing, adjusting her skirts around her lower half. Ultimately, she gave a heavy sigh before a reluctant nod. “Very well. The den is just down the hill to the south-west, just beyond the first row of trees and in front of the main river.” She told her, giving her a conflicted look. “I just hope you know what you’re doing.”

If she was being honest, she wasn’t sure what she was doing either. But she had to do *something*.

She owed him that much, at least.

There was no sign of the end of the rain. No light at the end of the horizon.

No end to the embodiment of his current mood.

Zoe had the fortune of being small enough to be invited into the homestead of the very mouse that had brought him the Warmth, able to sleep in a warm bed safe from the storm. Spyro, on the other hand, found himself taking shelter in a deserted wolf's den, just outside of the Stone’s glade. He was tucked as far back from the entrance as the burrow would allow, coiled upon himself in an attempt to preserve warmth while watching the rain fall outside. It was somewhat damp inside the cave, but thankfully the wind blew away from its mouth, allowing him to stay moderately dry...minus the occasional drops of water that trickled down the roots above and pitter-pattered against the cave floor…and against him.

All in all, his current state was nothing short of the weather outside: cold, wet, and downright miserable.

Spyro *hated* storms. Completely and utterly. At one point in his life, he enjoyed the simple pleasures of rain: he enjoyed listening to it patter against the windows of the Palace of Avalon’s upper floors, watching it trickle down the leaves and patter against the earth. But now, after his journey across the sea, all it brought to him were images of pain within his head: the roaring fury of the red-maned wizard’s magic, and the crackling bite of the metal giant’s buzzing ground.

The burns on his paws and legs flared every time lightning cracked across the sky, finding himself back in those wretched places every time a clap of thunder echoed through the forest.

Maybe it was a mistake not to return to Feywild. He had been frustrated and angry when he had first arrived home and wanted to distance himself from

those who had ultimately been responsible for this entire mess. But now, caught in the middle of the first storm of spring and forced to take refuge in a dirty old den, all the while knowing there had been a roof over his head, cozy bedding, and warm food waiting for him back in with the Fairies, made him realize that acting on his violate emotions may not have been the smartest move.

All he wanted now, so badly that it hurt, was to go back home…but now, after everything he went through, home didn't feel like home anymore.

When he first returned, that day when the ship first entered the waters of Nimh, he had expected to go right back to that sense of warmth and happiness he had known before. That he would be able to just put all the pain, frustration, hurt, fear, and trauma of the past ten years behind him and return to the life he had left behind so long ago…only to find that said life didn't exist anymore.

What was once recognizable things that would've once brought him that sense of home felt so…different. Everything had changed. The smaller size of everything around him made him feel out of place, just as it did on the mainland. And the feeling of familiarity that he had longed for so long couldn't be seen anywhere, even in places he recognized, such as the Stone itself, now the home of someone else instead of him.

Nothing *felt* as he remembered it.

It had become cold in his absence. Bitter. Hard. Unrecognizable.

No trace of the Warmth that once made it home.

It was the light of his fairy's wings that altered him to her presence; just as he was about to drift into fitful slumber, the golden glow of Zoe's wings slowly creeped in around the corner of the entrance. That confused him; he had assumed she was spending the night at the house of the mice that had taken his stone. Why would she leave the warm fire and cozy bed for the cold and wet of the storm? He watched as the light grew until she came into view, her wings glowing with a brilliant yellow light. The fairy was using a large leaf as a makeshift umbrella, shielding herself from the rain.

“Thought you’d be here.” Zoe stated softly as she stepped into the shelter of the cave, lowering her leaf, and putting it to the side.

Spyro was about to retort something back, only to realize that she wasn’t alone: there was another being behind her, but who on earth-?

That scent.

It was *her*.

The dragon lifted his head off the ground, staring in silent, wide-eyed shock, as none other than the mother mouse gingerly stepped out from behind Zoe. She stared back at him with her own widened eyes, but they held little to no fear; only a small bit of cautious wariness towards the potential danger he could be. Her body language was completely different from before; no longer racked with the primal fear of facing a dragon, but far more relaxed and at ease than she had been when they first met in the riverbed.

She was here.

Why?

Why was she here?

It was amazing how much a little bit of context could completely change how one saw things in the world before them.

Where there was once a beast of incredible size and unparalleled might, Mrs. Brisby could only see a sad, long-lost furling in the form of a dragon. What were once mighty battle scars of an unflinching warrior were now the brutal wounds of a creature that was in the wrong place at the wrong time. And what were once the burning eyes of the greatest of creation's creatures were now the sorrowful ones of one who could no longer see the world as he remembered it.

The so-called mighty purple dragon of legendary power.

Lost, alone, and longing for a life he believed he could never have again.

She knew exactly how he felt.

Grasping her hands together against her chest, she began to quietly approach Spyro, being as soft and non-threatening as she could make herself out to be (not a difficult task for her at all); it was as if she was trying not to scare him. Spyro gave a conflicted croon at this, as if he couldn't understand what was going on. Why this small, defenseless creature that once stared at him in complete and utter terror now gazed upon him with a saddened kindness.

She stopped, just shy of where his head had been lying on the ground.

And then she spoke:

“Hello, Spyro.” She addressed him in a gentle tone; one that was not made out of fear, but out of tenderness.

Spyro didn’t say anything; looking back, he wasn’t sure he would’ve been able to in the first place, confusion and surprise wracking his brain like the swirling winds of a sandstorm.

His name.

She said his name.

To hear her say it...to hear him being spoken of by that beautiful voice…

In the end, all he could do was give a soft but audible croon of greeting, unsure of what else he could do without breaking down into another fit of emotions.

"I wanted to see you." Mrs. Brisby told him. "To thank you again. For everything you've done for me and my family." She took another step forward, but still found herself unable to reach the dragon’s head, which he kept up well out of reach, watching her with wide, anxious eyes. “Can you come down here? Please?”

Spyro was frozen on the spot, a raging storm of anxiety and uncertainty making itself visible in the way the end of his tail quivered and how his hands tensed, his claws carving small grooves in the dirt. But, in the end, he ultimately obliged her request, slowly lowering his head back down onto the ground, to where the end of his snout was in arm's length of Mrs. Brisby. The young widow gave a warm smile as she reached forward and placed her hands against the smooth, scaly skin of his face, gently caressing it.

Her touch…it was softer than that of her children: her hands were smooth and uncalloused by comparison, a result of her life as a housewife before her husband passed. It was gentle…and warm…

He liked the touch.

"You're so gentle." Mrs. Brisby told him softly, her eyes carrying a deep sadness for the creature she stood before. "How could anyone think to hurt you like this?" Her fingers traced along a scar that ran across the bridge of his snout, just above his nostrils. To that, he pulled away a little, giving a soft growl of displeasure. Mrs. Brisby pulled back, looking apologetic for bringing the topic up. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have pried…"

The dragon stared at her for a moment, eyes flickering with firelight in the dark, when he finally did what he had been wanting to for the longest time, but hesitated due to Zoe's advice not to:

He spoke to her.

"Thank you for releasing me."

Mrs. Brisby's ears perked up in surprise as the deep, magical voice washed over them, even though the dragon's mouth didn't move one bit to speak. It was as if he was channeling his very thoughts into words for her to hear. And just like before, the context of the truth changed so much: it was a voice that thrummed with the deep rumble of an earthquake, and crackled with the growl of a blazing forest fire, but it was the voice of a child, just shy of his teen years.

“W-What did you say?” She asked, confused.

“That’s the only thing they ever did when I freed them from their crystal prisons.” Spyro continued, his eyes narrowed and his tone bitter and spiteful. ***“They would say: ‘Thank you for releasing me’, and then they would leave. None of them offered to help. Only a few gave any advice or warnings, but none of them stayed.”*** He coiled up on himself, as if trying to shield himself from the world, his burning eyes starting to steam from the water that built within them. ***“No help, no food, no magic, nothing! They just said those words…and then they left.***

I…I was alone out there…” His voice wavered, the deep, draconian qualities quickly fading away, leaving only the pained whimpers of a child behind. ***“Everything was dark…and cold…and everything hurt…****s-sometimes, I couldn’t even move, because it hurt too much. I had to just laid there, and wait for the pain to go away*…and they all just…left. All they ever did was say those words, and then they were gone.”

Mrs. Brisby’s covered her mouth with her paws, hiding the gape of horror and outrage, the emotions flooding her heart with a rush of righteous anger. She looked to Zoe, who glared at the ground in complete and utter contempt, confirming his words to be true.

The tears started to pour from his eyes, running down the grooves of his scales. His chest ached horribly, the Tight Emptiness at the strongest it had ever been before.

“What…what did I do *wrong*?” he asked, voice crippled with pure desperation. “I never met them before. *I never hurt anyone. I didn’t steal anything!* ***I didn’t do anything wrong!”*** With that enraged cry, he slammed his paws on the earth with dangerous force, shaking the den and causing dirt to rain down from the ceiling; Mrs. Brisby would’ve fallen over had Zoe not caught her.

But she wasn’t paying attention to herself anymore; she didn’t see the fox-sized dragon before her.

All she could see was a heartbroken child, abandoned and alone, forsaken by the world.

"I…I didn't…*I didn't mean to make them mad…I…*" He rested his head back on the ground, shifting it to turn away from the two mortals before him, closing his eyes. "I-I don't know what I did wrong…"

There was a moment of dead silence, broken only by the rain.

Then Spyro felt another touch of warmth against his head, this time against his right eye-ridge.

He opened his tired, tear-filled eye just enough to see Mrs. Brisby crouched next to his head, just in front of his eye. Her expression was one of pain, but in a way that wasn't for herself; she gazed upon him with truly sympathetic eyes. She gently stroked his eye-ridge with her left hand; such a small, simple touch...yet from it alone, the Tight Emptiness began to fade just a little bit.

"You *didn't* do anything wrong." The mouse assured him, her voice stronger than one would expect from such a small, timid creature. "You did so much for them, and they still treated you horribly. That is their fault, not yours." She reached down and carefully wiped a large tear from his eye with the edge of her cloak, soaking the cloth. "They refused to see you for who you truly are, and made a truly horrible choice…but you're safe now: you're *home*, with us, away from all who would hurt you."

Spyro blinked, looking up at the mouse in front of him with wide, outright-hopeful eyes. ***"With…with* you*?"***

Mrs. Brisby nodded. "Yes. Here, at the Stone, with me, Zoe, and everyone else…you saved my life today." she told him, pulling away just enough to meet his surprised gaze with her own loving one, tears of happiness gathering in her eyes. "Not just mine, but my son's as well, and for that I don't think I can ever repay such a wonderful kindness to me…but if you stay, I can certainly try."

That was it for Zoe.

Any and all further doubt regarding the impossible idea had been completely and utterly erased when those words left the mouse's mouth.

She watched without saying a word as the dragon curled in on himself and wept, leaning his head into the warm embrace of Johnathan's widow. Not just the bestial groans of pain that she had heard him give off for the past ten years, but full-on weeping, like a normal child. It was a quiet crying; soft gasps that sounded more like reptilian growling at times, but the tears were genuine: the hate, pain, sorrow and wrong he had suffered for the past ten years finally bubbling forth and out of his system in the form of large, hot tears. And through it all, Mrs. Brisby held him the best she could, resting herself against the dragon's head as she continued to stroke him softly, humming a gentle tune to the lost child; just as she had done to her own that day not so long ago.

It was a *stupid* idea.

The stupidest idea ever conceived in the long, *long* history of stupid ideas; outright impossible, what it was suggesting.

But how impossible could it be, when she was witnessing it come into fruition before her very eyes?

She sat down in the corner of the den, content to simply let these two have their moment as she began to work out the future in her mind. It was going to be tricky. A lot of factors at play that could either make or break this whole plan, especially from outside sources.

One thing was for sure: King Oberon and the Council could NOT learn of this. The issue of a family of Rodentkin this deep into Feywild's borders was no longer the problem: being the family of the Johnathan Brisby would be enough to get even the most stubborn of the rodent-haters off their backs, as none would object King Oberon's word. But what she would be attempting to do no amount of 'friendship benefits' would save Mrs. Brisby and her children from the wrath of Fae Kind, whether Oberon ordered it or not.

So many ways this could all go wrong.

But as Spyro's quiet sobs continued to reverberate against the cavern walls, and the gentle, heartfelt song of a mother filled the air around them, she realized that all the what-ifs and potential wrongs could wait for the days to come.

For now, all she needed to do was sit back and rest, content knowing that her dragon had, after ten long, painful years, finally found his way home.

Chapter 14: Bonus: Artworks, Set 1

Summary:

A small collection of artwork I made for my series. Plan to make more in the future.

Chapter Text

Test 1

Chapter 15: A Day in a New Life

Chapter Text

It was the chirping of the morning songbirds that roused Elizabeth from her slumber.

Her blue eyes slowly opened to the sound, a soft moan escaping her throat as she was pulled from the realm of dreams into the waking world. She was sad to see said dreams end; they had been of happier times, when Johnathan was around, and her little family was whole once again. Part of her wished to return to them, but she couldn't; there was breakfast to make and chores to begin. The day ahead of them had started. She took a deep breath through her mouth, letting the crisp morning air fill her lungs and send the spark of life through her body. She then pushed herself up into a sitting position, rubbing the remaining sleep from her eyes and the dirt from her face with her paws.

…dirt?

She was suddenly very awake when she realized that she wasn't in her bed…heck, she wasn't even in her home. What was-?!

But when she opened her eyes again, she found a sight that instantly washed away her worry and filled her with a sense of fondness and wonder at the same time.

Sleeping on the ground next to her was none other than Spyro, his head resting next to her vulnerable form, and his eyes still closed in deep slumber. His long body was curved in a half-circle position, forming a protective barrier around the area where she had been sleeping. Even in slumber, his presence was a powerful one: she could hear the air whooshing down his throat and into his lungs, see his sides rise and fall at a slow, steady pace. His face still sported many tear-streaks from when he had wept the night before, the still-wet scales glistening in the early morning light.

The night before. She remembered it now.

Looking up, she saw the ceiling of the abandoned wolf's den towering high above their heads, old, dried roots hanging down from the dirt like the claws of a hawk. Looking past the dragon's head, she saw the mouth of the cave overlooking the river, the crystal-clear water sparkling in the morning sun; apart from the moisture in the air and the dew across the ground, all traces of the previous night's storm had cleared away, leaving behind the makings of a perfectly sunny day.

She blinked in surprise. She must've fallen asleep while comforting him.

Part of her wanted to chastise herself for yet another act of foolishness she had committed: rodentkin didn't dare sleep in the open, even in long-abandoned caves. She could've been found by one of the numerous nightly predators, such as a weasel or a fox, and she wouldn't have lived to see the morning…and yet, another part of her felt completely and utterly safe. That nothing bad would've happened last night regardless.

And she knew why: with Spyro around, no predator would dare set foot anywhere near the cave, let alone come up to the entrance. This land had been claimed by its new king, and there were none foolish enough to challenge him for his crown, especially over what amounted to a small mouthful of mouse.

That being said, she did feel rather silly having fallen asleep in such a place so easily. The last thing she could recall was singing to Spyro as he wept, and then it just faded into dreams.

Poor thing…he must've cried himself to sleep.

She placed a paw against his face, gently running her palm across the rough, scaly skin, feeling what felt like a layer of smooth river rocks beneath her fingers. Stirred by her touch, Spyro shifted in his sleep before giving a soft groan of disapproval, cracking open an eye to see who had disturbed his slumber. However, when he saw none other than her standing before him, smiling fondly at him, both eyes opened as he shifted his head against the ground, turning it partially towards her.

"You stayed." His magical voice rumbled through the air, sounding more like a child in awe than a legendary beast of power.

Mrs. Brisby nodded. "It wasn't intended, but I'm glad I did." She told him honestly; it was true. She was happy to see him now, no longer suffering from the darkness of the night before.

"I thought it had been a dream." He admitted softly, not taking his eyes off her. ***"That you came to me in the night."***

She could almost understand why he thought that; the memories felt more like a dream than anything real, even if they both knew it wasn't the case. Heck, this whole scenario felt more like a dream than reality: talking to a living, breathing dragon as if he was nothing more than a lost furling. It was something she never imagined herself doing, yet here they were. She took a step back as the dragon lifted his head off the ground, turning it to look at her directly.

"How are you feeling?" she eventually asked, still a little concerned about his current well-being.

The dragon didn't answer at first; he looked away, staring at the ground in thought, truly thinking over the question.

"Better." He ultimately decided. ***"More than I have felt in a long time."***

And he truly meant it; the Tight Emptiness, the sensation that had plagued him for years, was finally gone, filled with…*something*. It wasn't exactly the Warmth that he had been searching for, but it was certainly a lot better than the Emptiness. There was also still a lingering touch of pain, one that he would most likely carry for many more years to come…but despite it, he felt much, *much* better than he had in the days before.

And he had her to thank for it.

Mrs. Brisby smiled warmly at his answer, turning her own gaze to look out over the early-morning light sparkling across the waters of the river. It was then she noticed that the cave was missing someone.

“Where’s Zoe?”

Spyro paused at the question before staring up at the ceiling; the mouse watched in surprise as his eyes glowed with a brilliant purple light, his pupils temporarily disappearing into the light. He held them like that for a moment before eventually closing them, his eyes returning to normal as he seemed to blink the light away. He then turned to her with an answer:

“She is in your home, tending to your children.”

Mrs. Brisby’s ears perked up at that, eyes widening with realization.

“Oh goodness! Timothy!” She exclaimed, scrambling to her feet in a worried tizzy. She had ended up falling asleep in the cave, with no one to watch over the kids back at the house; Timmy in particular was in no condition to be left without supervision, regardless of how close the cave was.

Spyro looked confused at her worry, but said nothing as he got up himself, stretching his body out like a dog does when they get up from a nap, complete with a wide-mouth yawn.

It was a testament to Brisby’s newfound courage for the dragon (or to her commitment to the well-being of her children) that she didn’t so much as flinch at the sight of all those teeth. Instead, she simply scurried up to the mouth of the cave and stepped out into the sunlight. The land was covered with dew brought on by the rain, the air moist against her fur and the ground muddy beneath her paws, but the sky was beautiful and clear, Frith’s light shining down upon all of his creation.

“The young one is fine.” Spyro told her surely as he stepped up to the cave entrance himself. ***“The medicine worked, and he has recovered enough to stay awake.”***

She still looked concerned. “How do you know that?”

“Zoe told me.” He stated simply.

It was outright humorous, the face of confusion she made at those words. Like a puzzled child confronted with something they couldn't figure out.

"It is morning." Spyro growled as he took his first step out of the cave. ***"I must feed. So, I shall hunt."*** Mrs. Brisby scampered out of the way as his large feet thrummed against the ground, his long body slithering through the air with that imposing mixture of serpentine and cat-like grace. He glanced over his shoulder at her as he made his way down the hill, turning to head into the forest. ***"Tend to your family in the meantime. I will be back when I have eaten my fill."*** He told her, eyes glinting in the morning sun.

Mrs. Brisby nodded wordlessly, her confusion being quickly replaced with unspoken gratitude; gratitude that he was choosing to go eat elsewhere rather than bringing it back to eat here. The River of Bones had been a nightmare in itself, and she had no desire for her furlings to experience the same kind of horror.

And with that, the dragon turned away and bounded off into the forest, disappearing into the underbrush.

When Mrs. Brisby entered her home, the last thing she expected to be greeted by was the pleasant, welcoming smell of a warm breakfast; the aroma of eggs and cheese made her empty stomach growl in anticipation, much to her embarrassment.

She headed inside to find that Spyro had been truthful in his words: there, in the kitchen area of the main room, Zoe was busy preparing a meal for her and her kids: scrambled eggs with cheese, judging from the smell (something she herself hadn't had since her days in Rosebush City). She was holding the metal pan and spatula with several layers of cloth wrapped around her hands; a bit overdoing it for heat protection, the mouse thought. Both Teresa and Cynthia were in the kitchen with her; Teresa was in the dining area, setting the table with plates and cups for everyone, while Cynthia sat in the corner, playing with her doll.

"What's all this then?" she asked, more amused at the sight than anything else.

“Mommy’s back!” Cynthia exclaimed happily.

Zoe glanced up from her preparation of the eggs. “Ah, there you are.” She stated simply. “Decided to help get breakfast ready, seeing that you were busy with Spyro.” That was one way to put it. “Sleep well?”

“As well as one can in a dragon’s cave, I suppose.” She stated as she came down the stairs, scooping Cynthia up in her arms when the child scampered over to greet her. “When did I fall asleep?”

“About the same time Spyro did.” Zoe told her. “You didn’t look to be in discomfort, so I came back to the house while you were with him.” She scooped up a stray clump of egg from the pan and ate it. “Figured someone should be watching the kids, especially Timmy, while you were busy.” She swallowed her mouthful. “By the way, I borrowed your bed last night, so you might want to shake the Pixie Dust out of the sheets before using it again.”

“That’s alright.” Mrs. Brisby assured her as she stepped in to help, setting Cynthia in her chair; the young mother was relieved to know that the children hadn’t gone the whole night without supervision. “How’s Timmy doing?”

“Much better than he was last night.” The fairy stated simply as she poured the last of the scrambled eggs into a large bowl, afterwards she set the metal utensils to the side and began unwrapping her hands from the cloth coverings. “Say what you will about Mr. Age’s attitude, but his medicine is the real deal.”

Elizabeth nodded in agreement, feeling as if a heavy weight had been lifted off her shoulders. “Thank Frith…” She muttered to herself, hugging Cynthia.

“Is it true, mother?” Teresa asked as she finished setting the last plate.

Mrs. Brisby looked confused. “Is what true?”

“That Spyro and Zoe are going to be staying with us!” Her daughter exclaimed excitedly as she took her seat at the table. “Zoe told us they were last night!”

The mother mouse nodded as she placed Cynthia in her seat next to her own. “Yes. They’re going to be helping us with the Harvest.”

“Dragons are strong, and we fairies have a knack for growing plants and stuff, so it’s only logical to ask us for help.” Zoe quipped playfully as she brought the bowl of scrambled eggs to the table, setting it in the middle before taking her seat at the opposite end of the table from Mrs. Brisby. Only one member of the family (minus the bedridden Timothy) was missing.

“Is Martin up yet?” Mrs. Brisby asked as she took a smaller bowl, using a wooden spoon to fill it with a small helping of eggs and cheese.

“We sent him to check on Timmy, but he probably went back to sleep again.” Teresa stated flatly. “He’s going to have another tantrum when he misses out of breakfast, the nitwit.”

“Teresa! There’s no reason to talk about your brother like that!” Mrs. Brisby scolded her eldest child as she finished preparing a breakfast tray for her youngest son. Timmy who was still too ill to join them at the table, regardless of the medicine. Zoe, however, gave Teresa a playful wink behind her mother’s back as the mouse made her way into the children’s bedroom, tray in hand.

Timmy looked much better than he did the night before; while still noticeably frail and weak from the disease, his fever and the delirium that came with it were gone and he had gathered the strength to sit up in bed, his back propped against his pillow. His brother sat beside his bed, the two of them curiously going through a small pile of Zoe's trinkets and other items, which the fairy had let them play with. Timmy in particular was focused on Zoe’s wand, which he was trying to cast a spell with; he waved it around like he imagined Fairies would, but not so much as a single spark of magic came out of it.

Mrs. Brisby scowled a little. “I do hope you two asked Ms. Zoe if you could play with her things before you took them.” She said sternly, alerting the boys to her presence.

“They did!” Zoe called from the other room. “And don’t worry. Nothing there will harm them; I made sure of that.” And it was true; ever since that close call with Cynthia the first time they met, Zoe had gone to great lengths to ensure all of her more fragile (and dangerous) items were hidden away from curious eyes, tucked safely away in her magical void with her other things. The mental image of Cynthia playing with the Speaking Crystal still sent shivers down the fairy’s spine every time she thought of it.

“I think your wand is broken.” Timothy said with a hint of disappointment in his voice, but sounding much better than he did the night before. “It’s not casting magic.”

“That’s because wands themselves aren’t magical.” Zoe stated as she got up and came into the room behind Mrs. Brisby, smirking at the pouting furling. “They merely help magic users focus their magic into the world. You have to have your own magic to make it work. Observe.” Gently taking the wand back, she demonstrated her own ability by channeling a touch of her magical power into the wand, making the rim around it glow with a soft magenta light.

“Oh…” Timothy said sadly.

“Let’s worry about it some other time. It’s time for breakfast.” Mrs. Brisby told him as she gestured Martin to move away from the bed. She gently gathered up Zoe’s things and placed them on top of the bedside drawer, safely out of the way, before taking her seat next to her ill son’s bedside, readying to spoon-feed him a bit of eggs, much to the boy’s embarrassment.

“Mama, really, I don’t need help!” Timothy tried to object. “I feel fine!”

“That’s because Mr. Ages medicine is making you feel fine.” His mother told him, successfully slipping the spoonful in. “That doesn't mean the sickness is gone, though.”

He swallowed the eggs with a bit of effort, for his throat was still sore. “But *when*, mama? When *will* I be better?”

“In three weeks. That’s what Mr. Ages said. You’ll have to stay warm in bed until then.”

Timmy looked distraught, but otherwise didn’t object, quietly accepting another spoonful of eggs from his mother. The others finished their breakfast pretty quickly (Martin ate his so fast he almost choked), as they were eager to begin the day with their new friends. They were already chattering a tizzy, like baby birds in a nest, each eager to show Spyro and Zoe around the farm. Mrs. Brisby, while charmed by the sight of her children being so happy, nonetheless calmed them down and reminded them there were chores to be done for the day ahead.

They would begin once Spyro returned, she decided. Wherever he had gone.

Blood splattered across the ground with each step as the wounded boar raced through the forest undergrowth, squealing at the top of its lungs as it did so. The large three-claw slash marks across its sides bled, spreading the life fluid across any surface the wild pig brushed up against, leaving a trail of red behind it as it fled.

There was no sign of whatever caused the wound, but it didn’t dare stop running. It knew that…thing was close behind, even if hidden from view. And to stop now would be a death sentence.

Little did it know that it was already a dead animal. It just had yet to be put down.

A large form of purple and gold shot down from the branches above with a mighty, terrifying roar that shook the forest, sending the nearby birds scattering to the air. Before the boar could even respond, it felt the monster’s massive form slam into it with enough force to knock it off its hooves, the mighty jaws clamping down on the back of its neck; the sheer strength of those jaws *crumbled* the pig’s spinal column, the bones cracking

like twigs, and the animal was dead before its body and its attacker even slid to a stop.

Good. Spyro was not the one to make his prey suffer if he could help it.

The dragon held on for a few more seconds, just to be safe. When it was clear his victim was dead, he released his death grip on it and stepped back, letting the body fall to the ground; he gave a guttural croon of approval before leaning in for the first bite, taking a large chunk out of the pig's well-fattened hide. The blood of his prey bloomed in his mouth with an explosion of taste, driving him to dig in with even more gusto, his bloodlust finally being sated…for the time being, that is.

And for once, he didn't feel the need to feed to try and fill the Tight Emptiness for once.

For it was gone, and he had the mother mouse to thank for it.

He continued to eat away at his latest kill as he stood amongst the trees, his tail swishing back and forth behind him as he continued to tear into the carcass. All the while he kept an ear out for anything that could demand his attention. Other predators, thieving scavengers, travelling Rodentkin, just to think of a few; he was a good distance away from the stone, closer to the border. The chances of actually running into travelling merchants or the like was higher than one would think, and he would rather avoid that kind of encounter if he could help it.

Travelling…now that was a thought that tickled his mind with interest. Not the type like sailing across the ocean again; he had enough of that kind of travel to last him several lifetimes (and for a dragon, that was saying something). No, what he thought of was travelling *outside the border*. He had never been beyond the borders of Feywild before, and now that he had returned to Nimh (and found much needed peace of mind and heart) he wanted to see more of it.

To see the world beyond the control of the Fairies. To see the mice and rats that walked and talked like humans…and if they would be as nice to him as the stone's small family had.

…he never did ask her name.

But he also understood the dangers of such ideas. Namely how his presence would be taken by said mice and rats; when the mother mouse first met him, she was as terrified of him as one could possibly be, unaware that he was more than just a monster with very sharp teeth; he had to show her that he meant no harm, and only afterwards did she not fear him. His gut instinct told him that doing the same with other Rodentkin wouldn't be nearly as simple, especially the rats with their sharp weapons and suspicious natures.

And he knew the futility of trying to win over those of suspicious natures.

He bit down into the hind-leg of the hog, sinking his teeth into the tough yet juicy flesh, before ripping the chunk he had bitten into off. He swallowed the mouthful and was about to take another bite of it when something on the wind pricked in his ears, causing them to perk up in attention.

Voices. Several of them.

And it sounded like they were in conflict.

Now on full alert, Spyro lowered himself down to the ground, crouching deeply to hide himself as best as his size would allow. He then began to silently slink forward, much like a snake slithering through the grass, his footsteps making no noise whatsoever as he headed in the direction of the voices: the opposite one to the Lee of the Stone.

And soon enough, he came across the source: another pair of weasels, he noted with heavy displeasure. The two predators had cornered someone in an old rodent burrow, one that was too small for even them to fit through, chuckling wickedly and taunting it with cruel words as they dug at the earth in an almost leisurely manner; they knew they had their prey cornered, and were in no rush to force them out.

"Why bother hiding, shriveled shrew?" The one in front of the hole taunted, fangs gleaming in the light as she grinned. "We're oh so very hungry. It's rude to make us wait."

“Not on your lives!” A familiar voice shouted from inside. “I haven’t lived this long just to end up weasel food now!”

Spyro knew that voice: it was the old shrew that had captured his fairy the fateful day they first returned to the stone. ‘Auntie’ Shrew, it he recalled correctly.

The second weasel laughed, lounging on the hill just above the den, patiently waiting for time and the elements to force the old Rodentkin out of hiding for him, while his partner continued to playfully paw at the ground around the hole. “Waste of good meat, to let it age for so long.” He said with cruel malice in his voice. “Best eaten when young. When flesh is still tender.”

Spyro’s eyes narrowed dangerously at that comment. Way too familiar to the words he had heard the other one say when it was going to eat *her*.

“As if I would give you the satisfaction of eating *my* flesh, you snake-faced savages!” Auntie Shrew snapped as she swung her walking stick at the paw reaching into the barrow, barely missing it, and sending the two predators into a fit of uproarious laughter. “We can play this game all day! I’m not going anywhere anytime soon!”

“And neither are we.” The first weasel laughed, laying down comfortably on the ground in front of the hole. “What will drive shriveled shrew out first? Cold, hunger, of both? We shall see.”

“Don’t count on it.”

Spyro’s voice thundered with primordial anger as he forsook the stealth approach and stepped into his clearing, his footfalls once again shaking the earth as he outright stomped out of his hiding place for all to see. All traces of the smug confidence and cruel amusement the weasels had was instantly erased and replaced with shock and fear; fear of the likes one could only feel when confronted by death itself.

He didn’t even have to roar to get them to leave: all it took was one thunderous growl, showing off his much larger and sharper teeth, to send

them running for their lives, kicking up dirt as they tore from the clearing.

The dragon glared after them, but otherwise didn't make any move to chase after them. They got the message clearly enough. They would not return.

He then turned to the hole. ***"The weasels are gone. You can come out now."***

"Do you take me for a fool?! That I don't know the monster that voice belongs to?!" The shrew's voice was notably several octaves higher; perhaps his growl had been too effective. "Frith have mercy on this soul, for one of the great serpents of the north to roam Nimh is truly a sign of the end times!"

Spyro fought the urge to roll his eyes, giving a grunt of exasperation instead. Not the first time he had heard something like that.

"Elizabeth Johnathan Brisby. Ever since the day Johnathan first brought you back to Dapplewood, I made it my personal mission to see that you would have as safe and loving a life as possible, despite your heritage. Not many others would accept a Feral-Born into their lives, yet I took that chance with you without a moment's hesitation. And it's a decision I have never regretted, not even on the worst of days. You have been the closest thing to a daughter I've ever had, and it has been an honor and a privilege to have known you all these years. I would not trade any of it for the world, and thus you will understand that I say this with the kindest and most loving of intentions: *you are out of your bloody mind*."

Elizabeth sighed. That had been the reaction she was expecting.

"I've told myself that many times since I made my decision." She admitted as she tucked Timmy into bed, helping her sick son settle in for a nap. The boy barely had time to get his objections to a nap out before he gave a heavy yawn, his eyelids slowly closing as the second helping of Mr. Age's medicine started to take effect.

“A *Dragon*. An *Honest-to-Frith* ***Dragon***. Here, on Nimh!” Auntie Shrew’s hands shook slightly as she took a sip of water from the cup she held in her shaking paws, her nerves quite shot. “Not even your husband dealt with one of them in his lifetime, and you intend to take it into your nest as if it were a lost furling!”

“He *is* a lost furling.” Mr. Brisby stated calmly as she led her Aunt out of the children’s bedroom, the two heading up the stairs that led outside. “One that’s been abandoned by his own kind. I can’t just sit back and do nothing.”

“But *certainly,* you see the dangers this holds for you and your family!” The shrew objected as they exited the house. “I mean, even if he means no harm, *look* at him!”

The two looked up to see the rest of her children currently at play…and today’s play was something else to behold: Spyro laid across the ground and watched quietly as the three played around his paws, telling him stories and showing him their toys. It had been a little worrying at first, to see them interact with something so large and dangerous, but it spoke to the dragon’s gentleness that he was able to play with them this way without harming them. All the while Zoe stood off to the side, keeping her watchful eyes on the whole thing.

“I am.” The mouse said without missing a beat, watching with a warm fondness as Cynthia showed Spyro her doll, which had been repaired since the day he brought it back to her, which Spyro gently poked at with the tip of his large claw. “And do you know what I see? I see a kind and gentle soul, forced into a life he never asked for, desperate for a place to call home. A soul that went out of his way to save the life of an intruder to his home. *Twice*. I owe him that, at least.”

Auntie Shrew paused at that, that particular fact tugging at what remained of her haggard old heartstrings. “I…” She began, her confidence in the matter wavering. She sighed. “…I suppose that merits some benefit of the doubt…” She surrendered. “…but I know for a *fact* that this *will* spell trouble for the rest of Nimh, once word of his existence starts to spread.”

Mrs. Brisby paused at those words but shook her head with resolve. “I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it.” She told her. “I trust Justin and King Nicodemus. They will see reason.”

“But what of Nicodemus’ nephew? That ‘Jenner’ fellow?” The shrew asked, her eyes darkening at the thought of that particular rat. “Trust me, child. That scoundrel will bring nothing but trouble when he learns of ‘Spyro’ here.”

Now that was something that brought concern to the young mouse’s heart. Jenner, the nephew of King Nicodemus…and one of the cruelest rats she had ever met. Even from the first moment she met him all those years ago, when Johnathan brought her back to Rosebush City for the first time, she could tell he was a dangerous person. Cruel, twisted, and cunning, he had been the most vocal in his opinions about Johnathan’s decision to take an ‘animal wife’. Part of her believed he was one of the main reasons her late husband had moved them out to the Fae lands to begin with. If he were to find out about Spyro’s existence, then all the grief she had received from him would appear to be pathetic school-yard bullying by comparison.

“I…I know…” She admitted weakly. “…but I’m not changing my mind. Spyro *saved my life*…not just my life, but Timmy’s as well. And I intend to repay his kindness to me, no matter what anyone says.”

Auntie Shrew looked like she wanted to argue more, but ultimately surrendered to her ‘niece’s’ resolve. “Very well. If this is what you’re absolutely sure of, then so be it.” She sighed as she followed her to where the kids were playing. She then allowed a small smirk to cross her lips. “Perhaps if we’re lucky, your dragon will *eat* Jenner when he meets the ruffian.”

“*Auntie!*” Mrs. Brisby scolded, though that didn't stop the smile from tugging at her lips.

“Now then, that’s enough playing around!” The shrew exclaimed, stepping forward with her arms full of gardening tools and supplies. “We have a Harvest to prepare for, and not a moment to waste!”

The Brisby children all gave collective groans of protest at her words, but Spyro merely grunted in acceptance as he got up from the ground and stood on all fours. The shrew's words made sense to the dragon; the priority of food always came first before anything else. He knew this even when living in the Palace of Avalon, as the fairies had taught him the importance of nature's needs well.

"So, what's the plan today?" Zoe asked, stretching her arms above her head to pop the kinks out of her spine and limbs, limbering herself up for the day's work ahead.

"Today we will start clearing out the old corn in preparation for the new ones." Auntie Shrew explained as he stepped forward, giving each of them a long piece of coiled string. Zoe took hers with a touch of hesitation, knowing full well what kind of strings the old rodentkin could make. "The winters of Nimh kill off the old plants, so we must clear them out to make way for a new batch." She then picked up two wood-chopping axes, taking one for herself and handing the other to Mrs. Brisby. "Elizabeth and I shall take care of chopping down the plants, while the children handle the rope-work."

"Rope work *again*?" Martin groaned aloud. "When will *I* get to chop down corn?"

"When I'm dead. Plus a few years, just to make sure I'm dead." The shrew snipped right back, not missing a beat, to which the furling boy pulled a face at her.

Spyro couldn't stop a small chuckle from escaping at that exchange.

However, his amusement turned into concern when his gaze turned to Mrs. Brisby. The doe was clearly struggling to hold the axe properly, the tool heavy and unbalanced in her grip; her gentle, uncalloused hands were straining against the weight, her knuckles almost white. Clearly, she had never handled one before.

Never *had* to until now.

“Right then!” Auntie Shrew exclaimed once more. “Let’s get started!”

With a mumbling grumble under his breath, Martin looped the end of the string around his round waist and tied it off. Then the boy furling shimmied up the nearest stalk of corn with the same agility and climbing ability of his animal counterpart; when he reached about two-thirds of the way up, he untied the rope from his person and tied it around the stalk, giving the rope an extra tug to make sure it was in place. After he climbed back down, he and his siblings all took hold of the string from the ground, ready to pull. Auntie Shrew then took the axe to the stump of the plant, chopping away at the root for several minutes, broken up due to the elderly woman stopping to catch her breath every now and then.

When the tell-tale signs came, namely the cracking of plant fiber and the stalk beginning to lean, the children all pulled the string together. Despite being well over forty feet high, the light-weight cornstalk easily fell in their direction, away from the field, giving the mice enough time to scamper out of the way before it landed on the ground with a light crash. Once the dust had settled, it was simply a manner of using the same strings to pull it out of the field and drag it to a secluded area at the bank of the river, where they would be stacked like logs at a lumbermill.

Spyro’s frowned in thought: it was a straight-forward method, to be sure… but it was also incredibly time-consuming: all in all, it took the small rodentkin almost an hour to chop down a single stalk.

It would take them weeks to do the entire field like this.

Then another factor came into play that would only slow them down even further: Mrs. Brisby herself.

With the shrew having chopped down the first stalk, it was her turn to cut the next one down…and it was clear from the start that entrusting such a task to her may not be the best idea: compared to her aunt’s swift and direct swings of the axe, her own swings were sloppy; wobbly and clumsy, rarely hitting the same place on the stalk twice. And it only took a few of them to drain her of her stamina, her breath becoming labored from the exertion.

One final attempt at a swing saw the axe slip from her grip and fly through the air; Zoe quickly hopped back a step as the blade buried itself in the ground in front of her, just missing her toes.

Mrs. Brisby, on the other hand, cried out in pain as the rough wood of the handle scraped up her delicate, uncalloused paws badly enough to draw blood.

“Brisby!” Auntie Shrew exclaimed in surprise as the mouse collapsed to her knees.

“Mom/Mother/Mommy!” The three furlings cried as they saw their mother give out a quiet gasp of a sob, clutching her hands tightly to her chest. They all ran to her side, giving comfort to the best of their ability.

Spyro, on the other hand, said nothing as his frown turned into a glare, his gaze glancing between the fallen axe and the field of corn with a stare that could set either on fire.

“Zoe.” He suddenly spoke with his usual draconian intensity, catching everyone’s attention. ***“Take them all aside and tend to her hands.”*** He got up from where he had been resting, his tail swishing dangerously behind him. ***“I will take care of this myself.”***

Zoe nodded without hesitation, putting a comforting hand on Elizabeth’s shoulder. “Come on. We need to get out of the way.”

Mrs. Brisby hesitated the fairy’s pull. “B-But the crops-”

“Will be taken care of.” Zoe interrupted her. “Right now, we need to take care of you instead.”

Elizabeth looked confused (and a little ashamed) but nodded silently as the fairy and shrew helped her to her feet; she continued to hold her bleeding hands together, trying to use pressure to soothe the pain, as they all quickly made their way back towards the farmhouse while the dragon made his way to the nearest corner of the field on the opposite side of the glade.

“Are you okay, mom?” Martin asked.

Mrs. Brisby nodded, trying to keep a brave face despite the pain. “I-I’m alright.” She assured her worried children. “Just a little scrape.”

“Little scrape, my thorax.” Zoe admonished, folding her arms. “You can’t partake in the harvest like this; your hands are soft and unfit for harder labor, as is the rest of you.”

“I had a feeling this would happen.” Auntie Shrew told Zoe as she guided her niece to sit down on a nearby rock. “Johnathan was a truly exceptional mouse, able to do the work of five bucks by himself. He always carried the yolk of the farmwork when he was still alive.”

“Big shoes to fill.” Zoe commented simply. “Especially for an inexperienced doe.”

“But I *have* to fill them!” Mrs. Brisby objected, even as Teresa brought out a bowl of suave and a roll of gauze from the house (the same she had used to tend to Cynthia a little while back). “We need the corn the harvest produces to eat and barter for other goods! If I can’t even chop down a single stalk, how can I possibly take care of my own family?” It was all she could do to keep from openly crying, tears starting to form in her eyes.

“But you *do* take care of your family.” The fairy told her as she took the suave bowl, motioning for Brisby to show her palms, which she began to gently dab the suave over the scrapes. “Johnathan may have been the one to do all the farmwork, but you’ve been taking care of him and your kids ever since you first married. You feed your children. You teach them. You *love* them. You’d be surprised just how much a housewife can contribute to the wellbeing of her family even from home.”

“But the corn…”

“Is already in the hands of a good successor. *Him*.” She motioned her head in Spyro’s direction; the dragon was standing at the far edge of the field, the end of his tail swishing back and forth as he stared up at the stalks. “You don’t need to worry yourself over it now.”

“Might I ask what he intends to do?” Auntie Shrew asked incredulously. “What could a dragon possibly know about farming?”

“About farming seeds and growing crops? Not much, honestly.” Zoe admitted as she finished wrapping Brisby’s hands, turning to watch as Spyro lifted himself back up on his hind legs, standing on two legs in the same manner a bear would. “But if there’s one thing dragons do well, it’s destroying anything in their path.”

CRASH!!

None of them had the time to prepare themselves for the shock that was to happen next, be it physically or mentally, as the very earth shook. Spyro landed back down on all fours and, with a serpentine flick of his lower body, swung his long mighty tail through the corn in a sweeping arc, cracking it with the explosive sound of a whip. The blow from the spine-covered appendage was enough to completely shatter through several rows of the dried plants, obliterating their bases and tearing their very roots from the ground. More than twenty stalks fell to the single blow, each of them crashing to the ground with light thuds or into the other plants behind them.

Mrs. Brisby’s eyes widened in shock, and found all her worries for her family quickly disappearing as a stunned realization sat in. An entire day’s worth of work, if not more, done in a single instant.

Her family’s reaction was just as elated; after a moment of stunned silence, all three of her children began to cheer with joy, Martin and Cynthia bouncing with it; no doubt they were thrilled to see all that work that they would’ve otherwise had to do gone. Auntie Shrew was just as stunned as she was, her jaw dropped and her eyes wide to a comical degree. Zoe, meanwhile, simply beheld her dragon with pride, a smug look of ‘I told you so’ adorning her face.

Spyro meanwhile, turned his gaze to meet hers. And that’s when she saw it: in his eyes rather than his face. A look of hopefulness…hope that *she* would approve of his work.

She couldn’t have stopped the warm smile from spreading across her face even if she wanted to, and she simply nodded to him, to which he audibly purred with delight.

The rest of the fieldwork was short-lived after that; with little effort and full of encouraged drive, Spyro tore through the rest of the field with the ferocity of a tornado, leveling every cornstalk in his path. He used his claws, wings, and tail to slice or smash his way through the dead plants with little resistance, tearing out their very roots from the sheer force of his blows. The cheers from the children only fueled his own excitement, prompting him to go even faster.

And in just a couple short hours, what would’ve taken the little mouse family well into the spring to complete was done before the sun had begun to rise into the sky. With one last swing, the last stalk of corn fell to the ground, laid to rest by the dragon’s razor-sharp claws.

“That. Was. *Awesome*!” Martin exclaimed with a hop of excitement.

“The entire field done! In less than a day!” Teresa cheered. “Spyro’s amazing!”

Elizabeth nodded in agreement, too stunned to say or do much else, still trying to wrap her head around the events that had just happened before her. Though the shock was nothing compared to the relief she was feeling, knowing that the farm was now in truly good hands, and her own weakness wouldn’t stop her family from getting fed.

“Yes…yes, he is.” She finally managed to say, smiling warmly as she watched the dragon grab a bunch of the stalks with his jaws, dragging them away to the riverbank.

Unfortunately for the children, their joy wasn’t to last: while Auntie Shrew was impressed by the dragon’s feats in her own right, she was no less adamant about continuing the work; the field being cleared in a day only meant that it was time to move into the next part of tilling the freshly-uprooted soil; a task simple enough for even Elizabeth to do. And this time,

Spyro wouldn’t be able to do it for them. So, despite the complaints from the children, the family all gathered their farming tools and got to work once the dragon had cleared out enough of the field for them to start with.

Meanwhile, Spyro helped himself to a well-earned break: he laid himself down on the edge of the field, lounging spread out on his side like a large cat, and simply observed the tiny mice as they worked, using both their paws and their tools to dig at the soil, removing all the pebbles and other pieces of debris from the earth to make way for the next batch of seeds. Zoe, meanwhile, aided in her own ways: since she was unable to touch the iron tools without burning herself, thanks to her fairy heritage, she assisted by using her magic to lift the dug-up stones off the ground and toss them out of the field.

It was impressive and admirable.

The way that common mortals worked hard to grow their food and profit. Such a concept was alien to a member of the Elder Dragon species, such as himself, who were primarily wild hunters who preyed on other animals for food. To actually shape the land and grow their crops was nothing short of magic to his kind, and to think that such little creatures were capable of such things was the impressive part.

But he also knew that some mortals, those of more advanced tools and machines, often took more than they needed, destroying the land as they did so. The Gnorcs were a prime example, having ridden their own homelands into a toxic wasteland for their own greed…so for any mortal, such as this little family, to respect of the world as they grew their food, working *with* the land instead of permanently changing it, was the admirable part.

And he found himself taking just a small amount of pride that he was able to aid them in their tasks.

Pride in something so simple and ordinary compared to what he was capable of…yet no less fulfilling. Far more fulfilling than fighting in pointless war…

The tilling continued for a few short hours until midday, when the sun was just reaching its peak; they were all very tired from the hard work, paws dirty and fur damp with sweat, but they had made a fair amount of progress. Not nearly as much as Spyro had done, but certainly enough for the small group of have done on their own.

“Alright, I think that’s enough for one day.” Mrs. Brisby announced, dusting her wrapped paws off against her dress. She had become aware of how tired everyone was looking, and thus decided now was a good time for a break.

“Guh!” Martin exclaimed as he promptly dropped his trowel and all but face-planted into the ground with a light thud, kicking up a small cloud of dust as he did so.

Teresa rolled her eyes at her brother’s exaggerated response. “Oh, grow up, you big baby. We didn’t work *that* hard.”

“Tell that to my *everything*…” The boy furling groaned, lifting his head just enough to give his sister a stink-eye.

“Now, now, that’s enough to that.” Mrs. Brisby told them, prompting Martin back to his feet as the others all gathered around. “You all did wonderfully today, and I think we can take the rest of the day off.”

The old shrew gave a huff, but otherwise didn’t object. “Very well. But let’s not forgo work too often just because we've done so much early.” She warned (much to the children's objections that it was Spyro who did most of the work). “To become lazy in the face of good fortune is to invite starvation in the long run.”

Mrs. Brisby nodded. “A little bit each day should be enough.” She agreed, turning to her children. "Help me return the tools back to the shed and then we can have some lunch."

"Yes, mother." Teresa said, gathering up her own tools while nudging her brother with her foot; Martin groaned in protest, but the promise of food was enough to motivate him to get off the ground and start cleaning up after

himself. Cynthia, meanwhile, gave a childishly-big yawn as she followed her siblings, dragging her little trowel behind her; being little more than a toddler, her work wasn't as much as the others, but it was tiring for her small body none the less. She rubbed an eye with her paw as she shambled along, until Zoe came up from behind and scooped her up into her arms.

"Someone needs a nap." she said teasingly.

Cynthia didn't object to the free ride or the comment, slumping tiredly against the fairy and closing her eyes. Zoe merely carried her in a shoulder hold as she followed Teresa and Martin, letting the blond mouse pup rest her head on her shoulder, as the other two furlings gathered around the fairy and began whispering things amongst themselves.

Mrs. Brisby smiled warmly at the sight; for a brief moment, she saw Johnathan in Zoe's place, being the loving father to his children, even after a hard day's work. It brought a smile to her face, but also a small ache to her heart.

A heart that hadn't had enough time to heal from the hole in it.

"You're sad."

She jumped a little at the sudden voice that thundered behind her, nearly dropping her armful of tools in the process. She looked up to see Spyro looking at her from where he was laying, his face as stoic as ever but his eyes warm and full of what could be described as a 'concerned curiosity'.

"Excuse me?" Mrs. Brisby asked, a little confused herself.

"You're sad, but it's a sadness you cannot ease." He told her, his telepathic voice carrying on the wind. ***"Your heart aches for something that is no longer there. What is this that you long for? If it is near, I can find it for you."***

The mouse didn't say anything at first, not sure of what to say.

“I…I’m afraid it’s not something you can just find.” She ultimately told him, lowering her gaze. In response, he cocked his head to the side, giving a confused warble of a groan as he did so. “My husband, their father, passed away just last winter, and we’re still coming to terms with it.”

Spyro blinked; a moment of silence passed before he spoke again. ***“He was a kind person?”***

Mrs. Brisby smiled, though it was filled with as much sorrow as it was happiness. She looked to where the children were playing with Zoe, the fairy doing her best to tread carefully and not step on any tails, all the while carrying the now-sleeping Cynthia like an infant. It was a silly and endearing sight, seeing the children happy despite the pain that was no doubt in their hearts.

“He was. We loved him very much.”

Another moment of silence.

“…What is that like?”

Elizabeth blinked away the tears that were forming in her eyes, looking up at him in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“To love something that much.” He elaborated, his eyes flickering with a strange internal fire. ***“You were willing to risk returning to my river, knowing I could still be there, to find the medicine for your son. After everything you went through, after facing death itself in my form, you still came…what’s it like? To care about someone that much…and to be cared in return?”***

Those words only made her heart clench even harder.

“You don’t know?” She asked, her voice quivering from emotion. When all he did in response was tilt his head in confusion, she realized just how deep this rabbit-hole went. She frowned a little, both at the dragon’s predicament and with confusion on how to explain it.

“Well…it a good feeling to have inside you.” She explained to the best of her ability. “It can be hard, and scary, and sometimes even painful at times…but it’s worth it to have someone to love. To have that feeling of warmth inside your heart.”

Spyro perked up at that. “*Warmth*?” He asked.

“Yes.” She answered. “It’s…hard to explain, but Love is a warm feeling inside you that you have for someone else. It means you care about them, and want to see them happy and safe.” She smiled to herself, remembering the warmth she had felt with her family. “To know that you’re not alone in the world.”

Spyro lowered his gaze at the thought, giving off a reptilian gurgle.

But before either of them could say anything more, a terrified scream tore through the air; Spyro immediately went on the alert and stood up, growling murderously. Alarmed and fearing for her children’s safety, Mrs. Brisby took off in the direction of the scream and rounded the house to a grisly sight: from the shed a terrified Teresa emerged, helping Zoe out at a quick pace; the fairy was holding a now very-awake Cynthia with her left arm, while gripping her thigh with her right hand, pink blood spilling down her ankle. Cynthia was clinging to Zoe’s dress as if her life depended on it, her eyes wide and tearful with shock. And following them was Martin, brandishing a hoe that was stained and dripping with putrid green-yellow blood.

Auntie Shrew was quick to join them as well, following just after Brisby. “What in *heaven’s name*-?!”

“Spider! In the shed!” Zoe growled through gritted teeth before collapsing to her knees, catching herself just long enough to let Cynthia down without hurting her. The blonde furling wasted no time running to her mother, crying with terror, while Zoe landed on her side with a heavy thud, clutching at her bleeding leg with both hands.

“I-It was hiding in the baskets!” Teresa cried, looking scared half to death. “I-It tried to attack us! Ms. Zoe kicked it away, but it bit her!”

As Teresa was talking, Zoe sat up and pulled her leg close. Mrs. Brisby gasped at the sight of the ugly red spider bite that was swelling on her shin just above her ankle, the skin around it starting to turn pale as the venom began to do its job. The mouse instinctively shielded Cynthia's eyes from the sight of it, though the damage was already done, and the youngest furling began to bawl. Teresa was already crying by the time she saw it, and Martin was doing everything he could not to (and failing as tears filled his eyes). This wasn't good.

"Spyro!" Zoe called through gritted teeth. "Gonna need your help here!" The young Safi'jiiva was already approaching her, purple eyes steeled with rock-solid determination.

"W-What are you going to do?" Mrs. Brisby asked, wary of the look the dragon was giving his fairy.

"Take the kids back around the house…so they don't have to see this!" Zoe ordered the two adults. "It's…" She hissed in pain. "…It's not gonna be pretty!"

"Absolutely." Auntie Shrew said as she stepped forward, shooing Teresa and Martin along. "Come now, children. We must go, now."

"But Ms. Zoe's in trouble!" Martin said defiantly.

"They will take care of it!" The shrew insisted, even as Zoe laid her bitten leg out straight as she could, lying on her back in the process.

"Auntie, here! Take Cynthia." Mrs. Brisby handed her inconsolable child to the shrew. "I'm going to help!"

"Are you sure, Elizabeth?" Auntie Shrew asked in worry.

"Yes, now go!" She ushered them off, before turning back to the wounded fairy. "What do you need? Anything at all?"

It was Spyro who answered her question. ***"Find something for her to bite down on."***

That did *nothing* to ease her concerns, but she obliged: she took her cloak off and rolled it up into a lump, offering to the fairy. Zoe wordlessly took it between her teeth, bracing herself for what was to come.

“What are you planning to do?”

“I need to remove the venom before I can heal the wound.” The dragon told her, extending its claws to full length and lining it up with Zoe’s leg. ***“This is going to be bloody, but it is* necessary. *Do you understand?”*** Without waiting for her to respond, he lifted his hand, claws glinting in the sunlight.

The mouse’s eyes went wide with horrified realization. “WAIT, YOU AREN’T GOI-!!”

****SLING-TUNK!!****

Too late. With the same speed that he used to level the corn with, Spyro swung his paw down against the ground with enough force to split down, sending a powerful tremor through the earth. The claw of his pointer finger came down on Zoe’s leg, halfway up her shin, so fast and clean that the limb was severed instantaneously; so much so that it took a moment for the blood to come flowing, along with the pain. Zoe screamed into the cloak, biting down hard enough for her fangs to pierce through several layers of the cloth. All the while the poisoned leg tumbled away from the point of impact, spraying blood across the grass as it flew.

Mrs. Brisby lasted a total of two seconds before her eyes rolled back into her head and she collapsed backwards in a dead faint.

“…u’re gonna b….ay?”

“Don’t worry, furba……..fine. Not the fi……st a leg, and pro…….’t be the las…”

“Geh…!”

The voices were distant and warbled, as if she was underwater. The black haze of unconsciousness slowly faded into light; as blobs of colors that slowly came into focus, as did the voices of those around her.

“Guys! Mom’s waking up!”

Elizabeth groaned as everything slowly became clear around her, including the light headache she was experiencing. The blobs of colors that dominated her vision slowly cleared into the worried faces of her family. Past them she saw the dirt ceiling of her bedroom; as the feeling returned to her body, she could feel herself wrapped in the familiar comfort of her warm bed. She was in her house.

“What…what happened?” She asked weakly, her body feeling as heavy as stone.

“You fainted.” Auntie Shrew told her, in a tone that was both relieved yet disapproving, using a wet cloth to dab at the mouse’s forehead. “Not hard to guess why, though, given how barbaric that treatment must’ve been.”

“Barbaric, but effective.” Zoe’s annoyed voice said from across the room.

Zoe! At her voice, life quickly flared back through her veins, and she quickly sat up in bed. A mistake, as her head swam from the motion, and she almost felt faint again. Luckily, her aunt was there to catch her before she fell backwards again. But Elizabeth wasn’t paying attention to the shrew anymore: instead, her full focus was locked on the fairy who was sitting in a chair on the other side of the room…and at the stomach-churning sight of her amputated leg. Strangely enough, though, it had already been healed to a degree, the skin having fully grown over the stump, which in itself seemed to be elongated in a peculiar shape.

“You…your leg-!” She started, fighting the urge to faint again.

“Is perfectly *fine*.” Zoe reassured her. “As is the rest of me.” She motioned to herself.

The mouse was unconvinced. “*Your leg was chopped off!*”

“It was the fastest means we had to remove the venom and stop it from spreading any further.” The fairy explained calmly, though a hint of frustration was clear in her voice; no doubt she already had to explain this to everyone already. “Healing the wound would’ve meant nothing if I was still poisoned. Afterwards, Spyro healed my leg and everything’s okay; we’re just waiting for it to grow back.”

Elizabeth opened her mouth to say something but stopped when the last part of that explanation registered in her brain. “Wait…grow back?”

Zoe nodded. “Yeah. We fairies are pretty much made out of magic: as long as there is a good source of it nearby, we can heal from almost anything, even lost limbs.” She smiled fondly as she got out of the chair; her wings fluttered to life behind her and she hovered off the ground, just shy of standing on it. “And it just so happens I’m the fairy of one of the strongest sources of magic in the world. My leg will be completely back by this evening.”

Okay, that was…well, it wasn’t better, but at least there wasn’t any permanent damage…at least, that’s how it seemed. “…are you in any pain?”

“It’s still sore, but nothing I can’t handle.” She assured her.

In the end, Mrs. Brisby simply gave a heavy sigh and slumped down in bed, running her hands down her face. It was then she took notice of her children gathered around her bed, looking at her with worried expressions; and just like that, her exasperation was immediately replaced with relief.

“Are you all alright?” She asked them, holding her arms out to bring them into a group hug, which they eagerly accepted.

“W-We’re okay.” Teresa hiccupped, though her voice said otherwise, tears brimming in her eyes. “We…W-We were so worried! There was the Spider, and it got Ms. Zoe, then we heard the scream, and then you were on the ground, and you weren’t waking up!”

“Shh-Shhh…” Elizabeth said comfortingly, holding her sobbing children close. “Everything’s alright now. There’s no need to cry.” She gave them a smile. “I just got a little spooked by how Spyro saved Zoe, that’s all.”

“That’s putting it quite lightly.” Auntie Shrew stated flatly, giving the fairy an unamused look. “Had I known you were going to use such a barbaric method, I wouldn’t have let Elizabeth stay to help!”

“I *did* warn you *all* to leave.” Zoe stated back just as bluntly…before reaching behind herself and taking out Brisby’s cloak, handing it back to its owner. “Though, I’m grateful for said help either way.”

The mousey mother nodded wordlessly as she took her cloak back, holding it out to inspect it; there were a few new tears along the middle of it, from where the fairy’s razor-sharp teeth had bitten clean through the cloth from the sheer pressure of the bite, but otherwise it was still intact. Nothing a few stitches wouldn’t be able to fix.

If only the same could be said about a certain purple reptile.

With Zoe currently incapacitated, it was up to Spyro, Mrs. Brisby and Auntie Shrew to take care of the spider. The dragon waited in front of the shed, ready to pounce the second he was needed, as the two rodentkin burned weeds to smoke the spider out. After only a few seconds, it emerged; it was a foul, black-carapaced creature, easily as large as Mrs. Brisby, with eight skeletal legs each as long as a mouse was tall. It twitched a set of these legs in the air as it crawled out of the shed, hissing angrily at the ones who disturbed it again. Its many beady-red eyes fell upon the two uneasy rodentkin, who quickly backed away as it stared them down, mandibles twitching hungrily at the thought of warm mouse blood for dinner.

That was most likely the last thought that went through its sicky mind; Spyro was upon it before it could even react, smashing it beneath his fore-paw with enough force to shake the ground and send both mouse and shrew tumbling back over themselves. When he lifted his paw, nothing remained but a few twitching legs and a large, disgusting splatter of sicky-green

ichor; the dragon gave a satisfied snort upon seeing the revolting creature dead, smoke billowing from his nostrils, before he sauntered off to find a place to relax and lick his paw clean.

As the day continued on, Zoe's words came true: her leg began slowly growing back, the skin healing over in a bulbous sac, stretching longer as the limb regenerated inside it. Mrs. Brisby found it repulsive to look at, a shiver running down her spine every time she saw it, but the children found it morbidly fascinating. When evening rolled around, the leg had stopped growing, and Zoe peeled away the sac like a large clump of dead skin; Brisby had nearly thrown up at the sight (and smell) of it, but her foot was fully restored, and she was walking on it soon after as if nothing had happened.

Said evening was spent in front of the fireplace. Mrs. Brisby was busy mending her cloak while the children played with Zoe on the floor. Even Timmy had come to join them this time; Zoe had convinced her that he would be fine as long as he stayed indoors where it was warm. Zoe was telling them tales from their time across the sea, where the world was much smaller than it was here.

"…And then Spyro unleashed his fiery breath directly into Doctor's Shemp's backside, defeating the voodoo caster with a final blow."

As she told her story, she used her magic to conjure images in pixie dust of the very events, making the characters in it dance to her strings. She made the purple one of Spyro breathe fire into the buttocks of the orange one of a large frog-like creature with a tribal hat and staff. The frog creature gave a comical howl of pain as he jumped up and down, yipping in pain all the way; that earned a round of earnest laughter from her audience.

"With his defeat, the lands of the Peacekeepers were freed from Gnasty Gnorc's influence and returned to the dragons once more." She finished up her story with an image of Spyro breaking several green dragon statues, freeing the trapped dragons inside and restoring the land from a war-stricken desert into a wonderful oasis. "But Spyro's adventure wasn't over yet, fore with the Peacekeepers freed, the Magic-Crafters were the next to need his aid. But that's a story for another time."

A little different from the tale Mrs. Brisby had heard last night, but the less her children knew of that ugly truth, the better.

“Spyro’s a hero! Just like papa!” Timothy exclaimed with awe.

“Pfft! I bet dad could’ve beaten that Dr. Shemp guy just as easily.” Martin said with a cocky huff, puffing his chest out in pride. “With one hand behind his back!”

“Oh, I’m sure.” Zoe humored him. “But you have to admit: even he would’ve had trouble with the womenfolk of the Desert Clans, especially those of Shemp’s harem.”

That made Martin shudder a bit. “Y-Yeah. Those were scary.” He admitted.

“Do mice live in the Dragon lands, too?” Cynthia asked curiously, remembering what the fairy had said about the Dragon Realms being much like Nimh, but much smaller. “And they’re all tiny like me?”

Zoe smiled at the furling, giving her head a gentle stroke. “Small enough to fit in the palms of your hands, sweetie.” She told her, giving her a playful boop on the nose with her finger. Cynthia giggled, only able to imagine what it must be like.

“Could you take us to see the Dragon Realms one day?” Timothy asked, utterly fascinated by the stories of the realm of dragons and their civilization that Zoe had been sharing with them that night.

That gave the fairy pause, the idea of going back to those lands making her visibly uneasy. Her and Spyro’s time in the Realms had not been kind to them; a fact that she had been conveniently keeping out of her stories for the children’s sake. But she quickly hid her unease, and she ruffled the boy’s hair with a smile that hid how she truly felt.

“Maybe one day.” She told him. “But right now, Spyro needs a long break from saving the world. Besides, he hasn’t gotten to see Nimh outside of Feywild Forest, so meeting you and seeing more of how Rodentkin live will be his next adventure. An adventure you can all help him on once you get

better.” That brought a smile to the furling’s face, eager to begin a new adventure of his own, just like the ones his dad use to go on.

“Do you think Spyro would be able to fit in?” Teresa asked, perhaps the only one of the four who saw the dangers behind such ideas. “I mean, get along with other mice and the rats, like us?”

Zoe’s smiled faltered. “That, I honestly don’t know for sure.” She admitted. “But if you all are anything to go by, then maybe the idea isn’t that crazy a dream to think of.”

A dream…maybe it was just that, Mrs. Brisby thought to herself. But it was their only hope for a happy future when Spyro was inevitably revealed to the world.

“And speaking of dreams…” She then spoke up, cutting into the conversation before it went any further. “It’s time for you all to have some of your own, as it’s getting late.” Despite the ‘awws’ of protests she got in return, she merely giggled and ushered her children up off the floor. “Let’s get you all ready for bed now.”

After getting her children to bed, as tricky as getting four story-excited children to bed, Mrs. Brisby decided to check on the last of the children in her odd little household. Holding a candle close for light and warmth, she stepped outside her house and made her way down the path toward the cave. Luckily, she didn’t have to go that far, as she found Spyro lounging on the hillside next to the farm, head turned upwards toward the star-filled skies of Nimh. His ear flicked at her approach, and he turned his head to look at her.

“I wanted to speak with you.” She told him.

Spyro’s ears flattened against his head. ***“If this about Zoe’s leg, I didn’t mean any fright.”*** He said, his telepathic voice showing no waver in its strength. ***“We did what we had to.”***

“That’s not what I want to talk about.” She told him, before she frowned in confusion. “Well, not exactly…I just wanted to ask if you’re doing okay after that, just in case.”

The dragon blinked, taken a bit aback by her concern. Why, out of all the creatures of all of Nimh, would she be concerned about him? He was Jendovahzoor. Son of Akatosh and true Master of the Elements. There wasn’t a foe nor force in this world that he could not face. Not a battle that he could not win. So why would she be worried? He could handle anything thrown his way.

“It’s just…not everyone can…” She paused, shuddering at the thought. “… just take off someone’s leg without so much as blinking. Even a dragon.”

“What do you mean?” He asked, cocking his head to the side. ***“I’m not scared by something I’m used to doing; it’s how we dealt with such injuries during our adventure.”***

That, however, just made her look even sadder. “I’m surprised to hear you call it that, after everything you went through.”

Spyro shrugged his wings. ***“It’s the best way* to *describe it.”***

“It’s not right, though!” She exclaimed, the small mouse making the fox-sized dragon blanch a bit in surprise. “All the *pain* you went through…the way they *treated* you…it’s just all so unfair! So wrong! And you’re acting like it doesn’t bother you at all! Even with all those scars!” She looked up at him pleadingly, her eyes wet with unshed tears. “Just…how? How can you *stand* it?”

Spyro didn’t say a word at first, staring at her with a decidedly-stoic expression (which was his natural look, given his reptilian features).

“I…I do feel things.” He then said quietly. ***“Pain. Ache. Sorrow. Anger. The Tight Emptiness. I’m familiar with all of these.”*** A guttural sigh of breath escaped his jaws, an inner light of fire flaring in the back of his throat and outlining his teeth. ***“I’ve felt them for so long that I’ve grown used to their presence, and have learned that they fade with time. Wounds***

heal and pain fades; it's merely a matter of waiting for them to do so…the only one that continues to persist is the Tight Emptiness, but even that I'm used to."

Mrs. Brisby had a *lot* she could've said in regard to all that, but the thing that caught her attention was the last, and it made her blink in confusion. "The Tight Emptiness…you mentioned this before. What is it?"

Spyro snorted, displeased to think of it. ***"A sensation I've experienced for as long as I can remember."*** He admitted as he laid his head on the ground, just glaring forward at the thought of it, eyes glowing in the dark. ***"An ache in my chest caused neither by arrow nor blade, but still hurts none the less. It feels like the inside of my chest has been hollowed out with a sword; like my ribs are empty and left for the cold air to blow through. I've been searching for what will make it heal for years, but never found it.***

…but then…then I saw you. The day Cynthia was hurt. You tended to her. Sang to her. Comforted her in her time of pain. And when I saw that…I felt…" He paused, staring at the ground in confusion. ***"…I don't know what I felt, but it was something other than the Tight Emptiness, if just for that one moment."*** He looked at her, eyes shining with an inner fire. ***"And that night, when you came to comfort me in my pain just as you had for her…I felt…"***

"*Loved*."

Spyro froze on the spot as her soft voice caressed his ears, and something familiar began to bloom inside him.

"What?"

"You felt *loved*." Mrs. Brisby told him, smiling warmly. "The Tight Emptiness you feel? It's called Loneliness. You're *lonely*." She approached him quietly. "And when I came to you last night and comforted you in your time of need, you felt loved." She approached until she was next to his eye, her entire body lit up in the glow of it…then, being as gentle as possible, she raised her hand and petted against the side of his face. The dragon

stiffened at the contact at first, a warning growl rumbling from his throat making her pause, but that growl slowly faded as she continued to stroke the scaly skin in front of her. “You asked me today what it feels like to be loved. And, well…this is my answer to you.”

She then leaned herself against the scaly surface in front of her and spread her arms out in a makeshift hug, doing the best she could to embrace the much larger creature; she rested her cheek against the ridge of his cheekbone, gently nuzzling him as if he were nothing more than another one of her furlings.

“You don’t have to wait for the pain to go away anymore.” She told him softly, looking up at his eye with her own warm ones. “People who are loved, they don’t have to wait. They have others that will help heal them, if you let them in.”

“…Let them in where?” Spyro asked, his voice now nothing more than a whisper.

Mrs. Brisby smiled. “Where else? Into your heart.”

And for that one perfect moment, things were perfect; two souls, one grieving the loss of one she loved, and the other carrying the scars of many pains, finding comfort in each other. Where the world took from them, they could find solace in each other, no matter how different they were from each other. No matter how large or how small.

Chapter 16: A Trip Through a Forest

Chapter Text

SIX DAYS LATER:

The waters of the river flowed past with hardly a ripple, the surface almost as smooth and flat as glass, broken only by the formation of the riverbed below. Fish of many sizes and shapes swam calmly against the current, their streamlined bodies effortlessly piercing through the waters, their underwater world peaceful and undisturbed.

Up until the second the water above was broken by a powerful force, and one of the large trout was seized by a pair of toothy jaws.

Spyro pulled his head back out of the water, his catch of the day thrashing desperately in his jaws. A quick biting down saw an end to that, his dagger-like teeth piercing deep, ending the fish's life in an instant. Satisfied, he turned around and began trudging his way through the river, which was currently deep enough to be submerged up to his chest, making his way back to shore. He dragged himself out of the water, shaking his body in the same manner a dog would, shaking off all the excess water from his person; he then hopped up onto the ledge overlooking the farmland and laid down with a heavy thump, before helping himself to his latest catch.

It was favorite spot to eat; where he could watch the Brisby family go about their day as he enjoyed his meals.

A full week. That how long it had been since the day he saved Elizabeth from the weasels (and by extension, Timothy from his pneumonia). Since the day the little mousey family found themselves welcoming a dragon and his fairy into their home. And since that day, things had certainly seen a big change for everyone involved.

After several days of tilling the soil, the farmland was now primed and ready to start planting seeds; a task that would've normally taken them just

shy of summer to complete had been finished in but a few days, thanks to Spyro's helping claw. In fact, that's what they were doing now; he laid there, snacking on his fish, as he watched Elizabeth and her children (minus Timothy), along with the help of Auntie Shrew and Zoe, performing the very simple task of planting the coconut-sized corn seeds into the dirt. It wouldn't be long before the earth was warmed enough by the spring sun for them to start growing, and with it their means of food and sellable goods would be produced.

Timothy was also coming along very well; thanks to Mr. Ages medicine, the young boy was healthy enough to move about the house without issue, though he was still confined to it. Elizabeth was insistent on following Mr. Age's warnings that Timmy stay inside the house for at least three weeks, much to Timmy's disapproval. He was ready to get out of bed and venture into the new life that had been brought to them, but his mother's word was final: it would be another two weeks before he would be able to meet Spyro face-to-face.

The tell-tale sound of fluttering wings prompted him to look up from his fish, just in time to see Zoe approaching him while dusting her hands off from the dirt she had gotten on them. He snapped up the last bit of meat hanging from his mouth and swallowed it just as she reached him.

"We're almost done with the field." She told him. "Just a few more rows and we'll be ready for harvest."

Spyro grunted with approval, reaching down for another bite of fish.

As he ripped the next helping free, he looked over to see Mrs. Brisby making her way to the front of her house, discussing something with Auntie Shrew. The mouse looked fretful, moreso than usual, alternating between glancing at her house and talking to the shrew in a worried tone. The dragon cocked his head in confusion.

"What's that all about?" He asked as he swallowed his mouthful.

Zoe followed his line of sight to see the two rodentkin in discussion.

“I’m not sure.” She admitted. “Mrs. Brisby had been acting strangely all day, ever since breakfast.”

That long? Well, that was concerning.

Spyro got up, shifting his weight onto all fours; using a fore-paw, he proceeded to swat the corpse of the fish away, sending it soaring through the air and back into the water with a splash. All that remained was a small patch of blood-soaked grass and a few broken scales. That way, it wouldn’t be left to rot in the Brisby’s farm, where it could make them sick.

They had enough of that as it was.

“I can’t just leave you all behind! What if Timmy needs me?”

“Brisby, I’ve spent my entire life looking after furlings in need. We can stand for you to be away for a little while.”

“A week or two isn’t a little while!” Mrs. Brisby objected, fretfully wringing her paws together. “And I’ve never made the journey without Johnathan before. I don’t think I can do this.”

“Well, dear, Johnathan isn’t here anymore.” Auntie Shrew said sympathetically yet firmly. “And you’re going to have to take his responsibilities if your family is going to survive.”

“So, what’s this all about, then?” Zoe asked cheekily as she and Spyro approached the two rodentkin. Both looked up to see them approaching, with Zoe fluttering next to the Spyro’s head; the dragon’s footfalls were almost supernaturally quiet for a creature of his size as he slinked forward with all the grace and light-footedness of a giant cat.

Mrs. Brisby gave Spyro a welcoming smile, but it didn’t last long as she lowered her gaze in troubled thoughts.

“Today’s the day Johnathan and I would travel to Dapplewood.” She explained to the two. “To buy our food, supplies, and other necessities for

the year, as well as partake in Moving Day's tasks."

"Dapplewood?" Spyro asked, glancing at Zoe.

"It's a Rodentkin colony founded right on the edge of Feywild." Zoe explained to her dragon. "Perhaps the only place in all of Nimh where Fairies and Rodentkin can interact on peaceful terms." She then turned to Mrs. Brisby. "And the only place you can get tools and supplies that would otherwise be out of reach for a wildlands mouse, correct?"

Mrs. Brisby nodded. "Yes. But the journey to it is three days on foot from here, and three days back." She told them, once again looking worried. "Depending on how long I stay during Moving Day, it could be anywhere between six to ten days away from home…and with Johnathan gone and Timmy sick, I'm just…" She sighed. "I'm not sure if I can do it."

Spyro cocked his head in questioning. ***"But you* need *to, don't you?"*** The silence he got in response was all the answer he needed. ***"Then we will help you."***

Zoe nodded, swooping down from above and landing next to Auntie Shrew with a dramatic flair of her wings. "If it's the kids you're worried about, then I've got that covered easily." She said with pride. "I'll make sure the little furballs don't overwhelm Ms. Windbag over here."

Auntie Shrew gawked in offense. "*Ugh*! Well, I *never*!" She exclaimed, poking at Zoe with her walking stick. "I'll have you know that I am an experienced furling caretaker!"

"*Experienced* is a kind way of putting it." Zoe stated simply, crossing her arms. "My point still stands: I can help the shrew watch over the kids while you're away."

That was a little reassuring, but there was still another issue to deal with: the journey itself.

"But how will I even get to Dapplewood?" She then asked. "I can't possibly make it all by myself."

To that, however, the fairy merely grinned, showing off a mouthful of sharp teeth.

“Who said anything about going by yourself? Or on foot, for that matter?” She asked as she motioned behind Mrs. Brisby.

To Spyro.

It took a moment for the confused mouse to put two and two together, but when she did her eyes widened comically.

“Wait…y-you mean *ride* him?!” She squeaked, alarmed by the very idea. “L-Like a rabbit?!”

“We Fae ride Corgis, but yeah.” Zoe confirmed, causally picking her nails. “What, never ridden on a mount before?”

“O-Only as a passenger!” Mrs. Brisby exclaimed, frantically waving her hands in objection. “A-And that was only a guinea pig! B-But to ride a *Dragon*?!” She clenched her hands against her chest, vehemently shaking her head no. “I wouldn’t last a *second* in the air!”

“Oh, you won’t be flying.” Zoe continued to explain. “But even on foot, Spyro’s much faster and more enduring than any mount known to Fae or Rodentkin. On his back, the trip to Dapplewood would only take a *fraction* of the time it would take if you made the journey by yourself.”

“That would certainly be beneficial.” Auntie Shrew muttered aloud, rubbing her chin in thought. “But is it safe for a mouse to ride a dragon, though?”

“It’ll be a bit of a bumpy ride, for sure.” Zoe admitted. “But I think we can whip together a suitable saddle to make it doable, even for an inexperienced rider.”

The task of ‘whipping together’ a suitable saddle was simple enough; Johnathan old rabbit saddle was a perfect fit for Mrs. Brisby, though it took a bit of work to get it to fit on Spyro. Using some ropes, they positioned the

saddle between Spyro's shoulders, just in front of his wings at the base of one of his dorsal spines, looping the ropes around his chest and torso in a style similar to someone wearing a backpack. The dragon laid motionless next to the house, watching patiently as both Zoe and Auntie Shrew worked around him, securing the saddle in place.

"There we go! That ought 'a do it!" Zoe exclaimed as she made the last adjustments to the ropes. She flew up to Spyro's head level, placing her hands on his snout to get his attention. "Okay, listen. You won't be able to just take off and do whatever this time around: you got to keep yourself at least somewhat level so Mrs. Brisby can hang on without getting killed. Capeesh?"

"What's a capeesh?" Spyro asked, tilting his head slightly in questioning.

"*Focus.*" Zoe snapped, tapping his nose with her wand. "Remember: go steady and even. Keep your back level at all times and no fancy movements. Got it?"

"Yes."

The fairy nodded with approval, petting his nose.

As that exchange was taking place, Mrs. Brisby was busy getting everything ready for her trip, as well as saying her goodbyes to her children. She was currently in their bedroom, giving Timothy his daily dose of Mr. Age's medicine before her departure, the rest of the furlings gathered around her.

"Are you *sure* we can't come, mother?" Teresa asked, disappointment heavy in her voice. "I mean, Spyro's big enough to carry all of us."

Mrs. Brisby shook her head no. "He is, but that doesn't mean it will be a safe trip." She told them. "Besides, we only have one saddle, and even that might not work as we hope. We'll have to be careful until we can come up with something sturdier for all of us."

She understood her daughter's desire to go. All of them had their reasons to visit Dapplewood, and of course were saddened that they couldn't come this time. The trip to Dapplewood was one of the only times of the year they had any contact with fellow rodentkin that weren't Auntie Shrew or Mr. Ages; Teresa, in particular, had been eager to see her friend Abigail after all this time, and the boys their own friends in Dapplewood.

But sadly, it just was not to be this year.

The front door opened, and Auntie shrew stuck her head through it. "Alright, Brisby. We've got everything ready and waiting for you." She called in.

"Coming!" Mrs. Brisby called back. She then turned to her children, giving each of them a hug and a kiss on the forehead. "Promise me you'll behave yourselves for Auntie Shrew and Miss Zoe while I'm gone."

"Yes, mama." Timothy murmured weakly.

"Will you be okay?" Teresa asked, the thought of potentially losing another parent weighing heavily on her mind.

"Of course she's gonna be okay; she's got Spyro with her!" Martin said, his voice full of confidence in the dragon.

Mrs. Brisby giggled at that. "Yes, he'll be with me at all times, so I think I'll be safe."

There was no way this was safe.

When Elizabeth saw the tiny saddle tied to the back of the giant dragon, she almost laughed at the absurdity of how it looked…until she remembered that she was the one who was going to be riding in that saddle. She desperately wanted to object, but ultimately found herself unable to resist as she was pulled along towards Spyro by her aunt and fairy friend. They pulled her along until they were at his arm, which was folded against his side as he laid patiently waiting for her to mount him.

“Are you sure this is safe?” She squeaked, looking up at the wall of purple scales before her.

“Perfectly so!” Zoe exclaimed in a chipper manner. “Now let’s get you up there.”

Brisby ultimately gave in, nodding in agreement as she began climbing up the side of Spyro’s arm.

That in itself was a sensation unlike anything she had experienced before: the dragon’s scales were rugged around the edges, but smooth across the top, feeling like she was climbing up a wall of smoothed river-stones. She could also feel him breathing and his heart breathing; could actually feel the air being pulled down into his lungs beneath her paws, and feel the steady beating of his mighty heart flow up her feet and vibrate through her body. For a brief moment, it felt as if her heart and his were beating in perfect unison.

That would be a sensation she would not forget in a long time.

Eventually, she scaled the face of scales and spikes until she reached the saddle; taking a steady breath, she pulled herself up and gingerly sat down on it, folded her legs to the right in a side-saddle position. She could still feel the soft beating of his mighty heart through the saddle, and she-

“Woah, woah, woah, wait a minute.” Zoe interrupted as she fluttered up to their level, eyeing the way Brisby was seated. “Side-saddle? Nonono, you’re not gonna wanna ride side-saddle for this.”

Elizabeth blinked. “But I’ve always ridden side-saddle.” She objected. “That’s how does are supposed to ride.”

“Maybe when you’re on a guinea pig or even a hutch-rabbit, sure, but this is a *dragon* we’re talking about here.” The fairy stated, folding her arms across her chest. “You’re gonna need both legs, one on each side, to keep a good enough leg-grip to hold yourself in place, otherwise you’ll slide off the moment he starts moving.”

Mrs. Brisby frowned. Didn’t sound very lady-like to ride like a buck. Surely it couldn’t be that bad-

“Spyro.” As all Zoe needed to say.

And all Spyro had to do was to shift his weight a bit to the side; Mrs. Brisby gave a squeal of alarm as she was nearly slid out of the saddle, grabbing onto the nearby dorsal spine with all her strength, leaving her clinging to the dragon’s hide in a very undignified fashion. She could hear the titters from her aunt and children as they couldn’t help but laugh at how silly she looked.

“Like I said.” The fairy told her with her own chuckle, flying over to scoop her up in her arms and lift her off the dragon. “Both legs, either side, for good leg grip.”

Brisby merely nodded, still a little shocked from the near-slip she took, as she was lifted up over to the saddle and sat down on it; this time she positioned herself as instructed, with a leg on each side and a foot in each stirrup. It was a little embarrassing to be sitting in such a manner, her skirts bunched up around her thighs, but at the same time it felt like a more comfortable fit; her back was certainly more comfortable with it. She took hold of the rope tied over the front of the saddle, which was made for her to hold onto, and was ready to go.

“You ready?” Zoe asked. When the mouse nodded again, she flew back and turned to Spyro. “Alright, get up slowly and steadily.”

Spyro did just that, unfolding his front limbs and positioning them under his chest before pushing up with all four legs, slowing rising from the ground in the same manner a cat would get up from laying down, his movement as slow and deliberate as possible. Even then, it was a frightening experience for the height-fearing Mrs. Brisby, feeling herself suddenly rise up from the earth, the world dipping down around her; she squeezed her eyes shut and clamped down onto the saddle with all her strength, what little there was of it.

Eventually though, the movements stopped, and she dared to open her eyes, only to find herself…not as high up as she imagined. Spyro was, after all, only the size of a Nimh fox, which wasn't that much taller than a Nimh rabbit or cat. Still, for someone who got nervous just climbing up a ladder, it was a struggle to stay calm, but it wasn't as bad as she imagined it to be.

Spyro lifted his head up and turned it around a bit, just enough to look at her out of the corner of his eye, checking to see if she was alright. She gave him a soft smile of reassurance, despite her knuckles turning white from how hard she was gripping the rope.

"You doing okay?" Zoe asked as she flew up to her level.

"I-I-I think so." She stammered, loosening her grip just a touch.

"Here's hoping, because you haven't even started moving yet." The fairy said in jest. "But before you go, I've got something to help us keep in touch."

Mrs. Brisby watched as Zoe reached into her skirt pocket and pulled out a large sky-blue crystal that was cut in the shape of a flat hexagonal diamond. She then brought up her wand and tapped the surface of the crystal twice with it; a wavy yellow light enveloped both wand and crystal for a few seconds, pulsing like a heartbeat, until it faded into nothingness.

"This is called a Speaking Crystal. It's a magical trinket we fairies use to communicate with each other over great distances." Zoe explained as she handed said crystal over Mrs. Brisby. "Whenever you get to Dapplewood, or perhaps take a break part of the way, just tap the surface of the gem three times to activate it, and we'll be able to speak to you even from all that distance away. Remember: three times on the surface. Got it?"

"Y-Yes." Mrs. Brisby said as she took the item in her shaky paws, tucking it into the security of her own skirt pocket. She didn't quite understand how such a thing would allow her to talk to someone far away, but she trusted Zoe on it.

Spyro glanced back in confusion and a little concern. ***“Isn’t that the Speaking Crystal you use to speak with King Oberon?”***

Auntie Shrew’s eyes went wide as dinner-plates. “EXCUSE ME, SPEAK WITH *WHO*-?!”

“I reprogrammed it to connect to my wand instead.” Zoe explained to Spyro (ignoring Auntie Shrew’s outburst), pointing to the wand in question. “She won’t be calling the King of the Fair Folk by accident anytime soon.” She then tucked her wand back into her sleeve, turning to the dragon. “Just follow the trail, Spyro: follow the main path in the trees and it will take you to Dapplewood. You’ll pass by the Fitzgibbons Ruins on your way there, so if you don’t see them, you’re going the wrong way.”

Spyro nodded before beginning the journey with a few first steps. His passenger squeaked again as she felt herself lurch forward at building speed, but otherwise stayed strong and in place as the dragon made his way out of the glade and into the forest.

“Goodbye, mommy!” Cynthia called after them. “Goodbye, sad purple monster!”

“Don’t you worry! We’ll keep everything in ship-shape until your return!” Auntie Shrew assured her.

“I’m taking your bed if you don’t make it back!” Zoe finished, earning a whack on the back of the head via Auntie Shrew’s walking stick.

To the common passerby, it would seem like a normal day in the forest. The wind was blowing through the leaves, the birds were singing in the trees, critters were scurrying through the undergrowth, and all seemed well. Just your average, beautiful day of early spring.

But then things would change: the birds would suddenly stop singing, and the critters would dunk into their dens, leaving the forest silent of all animal life…until they would hear it, softly in the distance but quickly growing louder: a quick, repetitive thudding, like a giant heart beating as fast as it

could. The ground would begin to shake, softly at first but growing with every second, accompanied by the distant yet ever-growing cry of fear.

Then, with a great rush of wind, he came racing through the trees: the mighty Jendovahzoor, or Spyro if you wanted to, bounding through the forest like a cheetah across the savanna. His claws tore at the earth as he ran across it, leaving long grooves along with his footprints. His tail lashed in the air behind him, and his wings, even when folded to his sides, shook and fluttered their membrane in the wind. His lungs heaved massive amounts of air, pumping his body with the oxygen needed to race at such speeds, and his eyes blazed with primal excitement as he ran as fast as an El-ahrian. And on his back, clinging to his back for dear life and regretting so many previously-made decisions, was the tiny Mrs. Brisby, screaming long and loud as they sped through the forest.

"How are you faring back there?" Spyro's telepathic voice thrummed in her head, allowing him to speak even when running full throttle.

"I don't know how you talked me into this!!" She cried, cloak whipping in the wind behind her.

"If you have the spirit to complain, then you must be faring well!" The dragon laughed as he bounded over a fallen log, soaring through the air before landing on the other side with cat-like agility.

"I'm praying to Frith to see the next sunrise!" Mrs. Brisby exclaimed after they landed from the jump. "Can't you slow down just a little?!"

"We're trying to make it to Dapplewood as soon as possible, aren't we?" Spyro asked as he continued to run at top speeds.

"Yes, but we don't have to make the entire journey in one day!" She told him. "Can't we go at a slower pace, *please*?!"

Spyro glanced back at the mouse clinging to his back; it had only been about ten minutes since they left, and she was already wanting to slow down? Mortal limitations truly were something else, weren't they? Ultimately, he complied with her request, slowing his sprint down gradually

until he was walking at a normal pace; faster than a mouse could walk, certainly, but no longer overwhelmingly so.

Mrs. Brisby slumped in her seat with a heavy sigh of relief, no longer having to hold on for dear life.

"*Thank you*." She gasped, no longer fighting the urge to faint, or throw up, or perhaps both.

Spyro glanced back at her again, this time with an odd look in his eye. ***"You know, one would imagine the wife of the Johnathan Brisby would be more adventurous."*** He stated simply.

Mrs. Brisby, for her part, merely hmphed in response. "Johnathan was always the more adventurous one of us." She admitted, taking the moment to relax. She smiled a little. "He would've *loved* a chance to ride a dragon like you."

"And I would've been honored to meet him myself." Spyro admitted with a draconian croon, turning his gaze away to observe the scenery of the forest in front of him.

For the next couple of minutes, things were quiet between the two, neither of them having anything to say. Spyro focused on keeping himself level as he made his way through the trees, while Brisby slowly grew more comfortable with her ride, her posture becoming more relaxed as she began to see that there was no danger with it.

Then, rather out of the blue, Spyro asked a question:

"How did you become his wife in the first place?" He asked, glancing back at her again. ***"From what I've been told about him, he never seemed like the type to settle down with anyone."***

Mrs. Brisby, however, seem unphased by such a blunt question. In fact, she seemed amused by it.

“A lot of Johnathan’s friends use to say that all the time when he first brought me back to Rosebush City.” She told him, smiling fondly at the memories. “Justin told me that Johnathan was known for being a bit of a play-boy back in his day; always flirting with women but never giving up on his life of the adventure…”

She paused, her smile fading just a touch as she recalled the sadder memories.

“…it happened one day when I was by the river. I was just another wild Feral-Born, scavenging for grass seeds while on the lookout for predators, when I spotted him floating downstream, clinging to a floating stick. He was barely conscious, weighed down in body armor and surrounded in a cloud of his own blood. I didn’t know what it was, but something inside me just told me to save him. Just as he was about to slip under, I swam to him and pulled him to shore. I remember the water being icy-cold, and his armor being very heavy, but *somehow*, we made it. He was covered in wounds, like those caused by claws, as if he had escaped a fight with a cat. I remember the way he looked at me, half awake and barely aware: the way he smiled before passing out.

The next few weeks we spent together, as he healed from his wounds, and we grew to know each other. He taught me how to speak, how to read a little, and helped me become more than just an animal in the wild.” She reached down and picked up the edge of her cloak. “This cloak was his first gift to me, made from the cape of his old armor. It’s one of my most treasured possessions.”

“I see.” Spyro murmured softly, his ears instinctively perking up a little at the word ‘treasure’.

Mr. Brisby nodded. “When he was well enough to travel, he took me back to civilization with him; first to Dapplewood, where I met Auntie Shrew, and then to Rosebush City, where I met King Nicodemus, Justin, and Mr. Ages, along with a few other of his friends. We were married soon after, and when we had Teresa and Martin, we moved out to the Lee of the Stone…well, your stone, I suppose, and the rest is history.”

"You missed me by one year." Spyro told her as he stepped around the curve of a small stream. ***"I began my journey to the Dragon Realms just one year before you moved here, if what Teresa said is accurate."*** He then looked down, giving a small huff of a sigh. ***"…I wish we hadn't missed each other. Perhaps if we had met back then, we would've known each other longer. Maybe things would be better now if we had been closer then…for both of us."***

Mrs. Brisby's own gaze fell into thought. That was something to wonder, wasn't it? What would things have been like had they met that day instead, and if they had known each other for that long? Would things be different than how they currently are? Most likely? But would it be for the worse…or perhaps, for the better. Perhaps, if they had known a mighty dragon that far back, Johnathan wouldn't have had to go on his summons alone and could've come back.

It was a nice thought, but just that. A lot of what-ifs and things that never happens…probably best not to dwell on such thing-

Spyro stopped.

The mouse lurched a little in her seat, a small spell of dizziness taking over her as she recoiled from the sudden halt. She looked to see Spyro staring upwards at something, his eyes widened with a look of uncertainty.

She looked past him to see what was wrong: there, standing over the path that led out of the forest, were two giant trees whose branches formed a great arch over said path. Both trees were truly unique, their trunks forming around two enormous chunks of amber that glowed orange in the dim light, the telltale twinkling of magic surrounding them. It truly looked like the magical gateway to another world…or, in this case, the exit from one. She recognized these trees; she and her family had passed through this very arch to get to the Lee of the Stone when they first moved here.

"What are they?" She asked in wonder.

"Border Trees of Feywild." He said, his voice a touch worried. ***"They mark the edge of the territory, all around the kingdom…"*** He stared past

them at the path further beyond. ***"…I've…never set foot beyond this point. Ever."***

"Not once?"

"I was never allowed to." He explained, not once taking his eyes off the trees. ***"They always said it was too dangerous to go into the world of the Rodentkin. That they wouldn't see me as anything other than a monster. And when I was small, I had every reason to accept their wishes…but now that we're actually going to cross it and go into a Rodentkin kingdom…I'm not sure what to think."***

She could understand his concerns. Even relate to them. She had the exact same feelings when she had been brought into the world of her kin for the first time, all those years ago. But then, she had Johnathan to hold her hand and guide the way.

Now, it was her turn to be the guide.

"Well, as Johnathan used to say: we'll never know what it's like unless we take that first brave step." She told him. He perked up at that, glancing back at her, to which she smiled warmly. "It'll be okay. I'll be here."

That seemed to do the trick, and the dragon gave a happy thrum at her words. He then turned back towards the archway, looking up at the glowing, amber-filled trees one last time, before taking a deep breath and stepping forward. He acted as if he expected an invisible barrier to stop him from going any further, but even with all his trepidation, he passed through the arch with no issue whatsoever. He looked to his left, and then to his right. Nothing had changed.

He was out of Feywild.

"How does it feel?" Mrs. Brisby asked.

Spyro stared out into the distant forest for a moment.

"Good." He ultimately decided. ***"It feels good."***

As they continued on, neither of them noticed the way the glow of the trees began to change, flashing on and off in rapid succession.

“King Oberon! It’s an emergency!”

Oberon looked up from his desk to see a guard that had all but slammed his doors open, eyes wide and breath frantic.

“What’s going on?” He demanded.

“It’s Jendovahzoor!” The guard gasped. “We just got the signal from the south-western trees! He’s passed the border! He’s in Rodentkin territory now!”

Chapter 17: Spyro to the Rescue...Again

Chapter Text

A FEW HOURS LATER:

The forest was just as beautiful here as it was in Feywild.

But even so, he could sense the difference. Smell it in the air: the lack of magical influence over the land, which grew its life naturally, without the need for fairies and their magics.

It was strange…and yet it felt natural.

Like this was how the world was supposed to be.

Spyro didn't say anything as he reached the top of the hill, stopping so he and Mrs. Brisby could take the moment to overlook the distant woods…the woods beyond all that the dragon had known; the sun shone down over the seemingly endless sea of trees, the wind flowing through the green leaves like the currents of the ocean, and flocks of birds flying through the air like schools of fish, their songs echoing across the landscape. The tree line was broken up only by the great river, which continued to wind back and forth across the horizon, its sparkling blue waters reflecting the sun's golden glow.

It was quite a wondrous sight.

And Mrs. Brisby could barely believe she was seeing it already.

It had only been a few hours since they had passed the Border Trees, and yet they were at the hill that marked the halfway part of the journey; what would've taken her at least a day and a half to reach the hill's peak on foot, they had reached in a fraction of that time thanks to Spyro. As much as she didn't want to admit it, his frighteningly-incredible speed and stamina did indeed help make the trip a *lot* shorter.

If they hurried, they may very well make it to Dapplewood before sunset. But for the time being, the mouse needed a much-needed break from said speed. "Let's make a stop here."

"Are you sure?" Spyro asked, giving her a questioning glance. ***"I can keep going, if you wish."***

"I'm sure you can, but *I* need a break." Mrs. Brisby told him frankly, ready and eager to get out of the saddle for a little bit.

"Very well." He said simply as he shifted his body and laid down on the top of the hill in a cat-like manner; the ground shook slightly as his weight came down on it, the soft thud vibrating across the hill. Still ever uneasy with it all, Mrs. Brisby held on tight and waited for the dragon to stop moving entirely before she risked getting off, climbing down the side of the dragon's folded arm until her paws touched the long-missed earth.

"Thank you." She said gratefully as she stood there for a moment, just taking in the feeling of finally being on sturdy solid ground again.

The wind continued to blow gently across the hilltop as the mouse briefly hopped back up onto the dragon's back and rummaged through the saddlebags that hung against it. From the bags she retrieved a loaf of bread and a chunk of cheese that had been packed for the journey; Spyro simply watched from the corner of his eye as she climbed back down with her food underneath her chin, taking a seat on the ground next to his foreleg. Once in a comfortable position, she ripped off a piece of her loaf of bread and began to nibble at it in a rather adorable way, occasionally taking equally-cute nibbles out of her cheese every now and then.

A moment passed before she looked up at Spyro, who had been lounging quietly behind her…or around her, given the way his body and tail curled to form a protective wall around the part of the hill she was resting on, forming a makeshift wall around her. His head was held up high, the sun glinting off the scales and horns in a radiant manner, eyes scanning the horizon for any potential threats. The beautiful scenery seemed to only complement his primordial regal-ness.

The alpha of the land overlooking his domain.

"Would you like some?" she asked as she tore her loaf in half, offering one of the halves to him.

He glanced down at her from the corner of his eye, shaking his head afterwards. ***"I'll hunt for my fill when you're safe in Dapplewood."*** He said simply.

"Oh." She muttered, feeling a pinch of guilt that he was choosing to go without food until she was safe. She continued to eat in silence, finishing off her bread and cheese with no interruption, giving a content sigh as she laid back against Spyro's arm, resting her hands in her lap.

It was through this action that her hand came across a familiar hard object; she looked down, reaching into her skirt pocket to pull out the Speaking Crystal Zoe had given her before they left. She stared at it in wonder: a means to speak to her family even when she was away, the fairy had said… but how was this used again? She tilted her head, a confused scowl coming over her features as she fumbled around with the shiny crystal in her paws. A light went off in her brain as she remembered: tap the surface of the crystal three times.

Shifting the gem in her hands until its flat surface faced her, she lifted a paw and gently patted said surface, unsure of how much strength was needed to do so. Once…Twice…

At the third touch, the gemstone began to glow with a blinking blue light, pulsing in and out like the rhythm of a heartbeat as the sound of wind-chimes began to fill the air around it. Brisby's eyes widened in a sense of wonder as she beheld the glowing stone, the blue light reflecting in her eyes. Spyro glanced down from his watch, curious as to what she was trying to attempt; he wasn't even sure if Rodentkin were able to use magic, so to see her actually get the crystal working surprised him on its own.

A few seconds passed as the crystal continued to pulse like a magical heart, waiting for whoever was on the other side to answer. She was just about to try again when the soft blue glow turned into a brilliant, almost-white light,

and she felt an invisible force tugging at it; with an alarmed gasp, she instinctively dropped it, only for it to hover in the air just in front of her. Spyro turned his head to watch as the pixie dust came together around the crystal to form a single orb of white light floating in the air. And from deep within the light orb, an image formed: first it was faded and blurry, as if surrounded by fog, but eventually the image cleared to reveal-

"There you are! I was wondering when you were gonna call!"

Mrs. Brisby blinked in surprise, bringing her paw up to her lips, as the image of Zoe's face materialized within the light. From what little she could see around the fairy's head, she appeared to be in front of the cornfield, her hair a bit disheveled and her cheeks freckled with dirt smudges.

Incredible. To be this far away from her home and yet able to see and hear it as if she was still there.

Truly the wonders of magic.

"H-Hello, Zoe." Mrs. Brisby said, albeit with a bit of uncertainty. "You can hear me, right?"

"Hear and see you." Zoe stated as she used a thumb to wipe the dirt from her face.

"Is that Brisby?" A second voice on Zoe's end of the crystal asked, and Zoe barely had time to object as Auntie Shrew pushed her way into the image, shoving the fairy to the side. *"Well, as I live and breathe! Elizabeth!* Truly *a wondrous piece of magic, these gems."*

"Crystals!" Zoe snapped as she attempted to push herself back into the image, resulting in a comical smashing of faces between fairy and shrew. *"And do you mind? I'm trying to talk here!"*

"Mother?" A third voice entered the picture, only for Teresa to push her way up from under the chins of the two bickering adults. Her face immediately lit up upon seeing her mother on the opposite side of the crystal's image. *"Mother! It's really you!"*

"Hey, it is mom!" Martin said as he and Cythina joined in on the pile.

"Hi, mommy!" Cynthia called to her, barely able to squeeze her own chubby face into view.

"Alright! Everyone back up a bit so I can adjust this…" Zoe exclaimed as she gently nudged everyone off her person; the image became a blur as Zoe's hand came up and completely engulfed the view, twisting around it in a way that made the sides of the image expand. Her hand then retreated, revealing the image within the crystal had expanded significantly, allowing her to see all of them at once without them having to crowd around. *"There we go. How's that?"*

A deep warmth bloomed in Mrs. Brisby's chest at the sight of them all, her hands reaching up and taking the glowing orb of magic in her paws, a gentle bubble of laughter escaping her lips at the silliness that she beheld. It was like a moving portrait of her family, only it was them, no matter how far away; for a brief moment, it was as if she was holding her family together in her hands, protected and safe from the dangers of the world.

"Much better." She said with a warm smile.

She didn't notice Spyro giving her an unreadable stare out of the corner of his eye.

"Gotta say: part of me expected the crystal wouldn't work for a mouse." Zoe told her as the others gathered around again, this time less intrusively. "*Fae Magic isn't exactly crafted with rodentkin use in mind…but here we are."*

"How are you all doing?" Mrs. Brisby asked. "Everything okay with the farm?"

"We've just finished seeding the field." Auntie Shrew told her, sounding plenty surprised (and a little proud) of her own words. *"It's completely ready for the next rain."*

That was enough to take her aback several times. The sheer idea that taking down last year's crops and re-seeding the field, something that often took weeks if not months to complete, had been done in about a week's time alone was mind-blowing. She was troubled thinking of what to do with all the free time they would now have…

And it was all thanks to him; the one who took up Johnathan's mantle and saved her farm.

She glanced over to where Spyro's head lay, just catching him staring at her in silence; he quickly looked away, pretending to be watching the wind blowing through the distant trees. That earned a quiet giggle of amusement from the mouse.

"So, how have you *been doing?"* The old shrew then asked. *"I hope the beast hasn't been giving you* too *much trouble."*

Spyro snorted flatly at that accusation, completely unamused; Brisby raised her hand to cover her mouth, hiding the wide smile that had formed on it from his action. "On the contrary: he's been *amazing*." She told her aunt. "We're currently at Canopy Peak right now, taking a break for lunch."

"Ca-…Canopy Peak?!" She finally exclaimed in disbelief. *"But that's at least a full day's journey on foot!"*

"What did I tell you all? No better way to travel than on dragon-back." Zoe said smugly, eyes closed in a look of pride. She then reopened her eyes, looking just a touch concerned. *"How* is *Spyro doing? First time outside of Feywild's borders and all that, that is."*

"He seems to be doing fine." Mrs. Brisby told her, watching as the dragon rested his head on the ground, closing his own eyes as if to slumber. "He was a little nervous to pass the border, but he seems to be doing okay now."

The fairy gave a resigned yet frustrated sigh. *"You can blame the stricter members of the* council *for that."* She spat the word with heavy distaste. *"For fifty years, they tried to cement the idea that he needed to stay in the forest into his mind, telling him all sorts of stories of how dangerous the*

world outside was, or how he would never be welcomed in the world of the Rodentkin. Whatever it took to keep their idol within Feywild, where they believe he has to remain in order to stay safe."

Mrs. Brisby didn't say anything. Despite how cruel the actions of the fairy council sounded, she could almost understand them: wanting to keep something you treasured safe…

"Doesn't matter now." Zoe then decided, straightening herself. *"He's out of Feywild; no going back from this."*

"On the topic of dragons going places…" Auntie Shrew then spoke up. *"I have a question I should've asked from the start: what do you intend to do once you two make it to Dapplewood? With Spyro, I mean."*

That question took Mrs. Brisby aback. What *was* she planning to do when they got to Dapplewood? It wasn't as if she could just bring Spyro into it; the mere sight of him would send the entire town into a mass panic, even if he meant them no harm. She looked over to the dragon in question to see him staring at her expectantly, waiting for an answer that should be plenty obvious in his mind.

"I…I didn't really think about it until now." She admitted sheepishly, glancing away with an embarrassed blush.

She could feel the dragon give an exasperated guttural rattle of a sigh as he turned his gaze away, neither impressed nor amused.

Her aunt gave a similar reaction. *"Brisby, honestly. You don't actually expect the people of Dapplewood to take more than one look at him before running for the hills, do you*?" She asked, sounding disappointed.

"N-No, no. I never did." Brisby assured them with a stammer. "I just… didn't give the idea much thought until now." She looked back at Spyro, whose eyes were once again closed as if he was asleep, but the way his ear was positioned gave away the fact he was listening. "They were so welcoming to me when I first came there…I just dream that they would be the same for him."

"It's a nice dream, but a sadly-unrealistic one." Zoe said, taking the reins of the conversation again. *"I'm sure they're a nice bunch, but a dragon is still a dragon. As much as I personally loathe the idea of anyone thinking ill of him, it's a reality that I had to accept long ago. He'll need to stay away from the village."*

Mrs. Brisby nodded in agreement. "I suppose we'll just-"

Whatever she was about to suggest was lost to eternity as Spyro's eyes snapped open and he lifted his head off the ground in a quick motion, alerted to something they couldn't see. Brisby looked up in surprise as the dragon stared into the distance down the hillside, both eyes wide open and both ears perked up to observe as sharply as he could. He stood like this for a moment, still as a statue, before he suddenly jumped to his feet, sending the startled mouse rolling from the sheer impact of his feet against the ground, and bounded down the hill as fast as his legs would go, heading to the right of the main path to Dapplewood.

"S-Spyro, where are you going?!" Mrs. Brisby called after him in surprise, barely having enough time to recover from her tumble. "C-Come back!"

But her cries fell on deaf ears, and the dragon disappeared into the underbrush, the last of his tail whooshing through the air behind him.

"Brisby?! Brisby, what happened?!" Auntie Shrew's voice exclaimed from the fallen Speaking Crystal.

The mouse scrambled to his feet, picking up the crystal as she stared after the dragon with fretful worry. "I-I don't know!" She stammered. "Spyro just took off into the forest!"

"Give me a sec…" Zoe told them as she placed her fingers to her temple. Everyone watched as the fairy's eyes began to glow with a brilliant purple light, her pupils temporarily disappearing into said light as she focused. She didn't say anything for a moment, her expression steeled with concentration, only for her eyes to go wide with alarm.

"What is it?" Brisby asked, recognizing the light; it was the same thing Spyro did the morning they spent in his cave.

All the fairy needed to say was one word:

"Trouble."

"SHUT THE BITCH UP!"

That was all she heard before her screams were cut short by a brutal strike across the face, sending her tumbling to the ground. The young rat didn't even have time to recover, let alone escape, before she was bodily pinned to the earth by their filthy paws. Tears sprung from her green eyes as they forced her mouse-like face against the dirt, her captor's grips tight enough to cause her skin to bruise under her fur; from here, it was all too easy to see the numerous corpses of her guards lying about her, all of them brutally murdered and in pools of their own blood.

This was not how she had imagined her day would go; not even in her worst nightmares could she picture something like this ever happening.

And yet here it was, and she was all too awake.

"Wait, wait! You can't do this!" She heard someone call out; she looked over just in time to see one of the largest of these bandits, a true monster of a rat, lifting the mouse carriage driver up by the collar of his shirt with one hand. "I followed your orders! I brought her to you! We had a deal-!"

That was the last thing he said before his throat was slit open by the bandit's knife. The rat then promptly dropped the dying mouse, letting him fall to the ground to choke out on his own blood.

"Deal's off." He snarled with a voice that sounded more like an animal's growl, not even bothering to wipe the blood off his blade before sheathing it again.

She whimpered pathetically, struggling to keep from flat out crying as they stood over her, pinning her arms behind her back non-too gently before tying her wrists off with thick ropes. Her ankles were bound right after, the bandits viciously ripping away pieces of her skirts to get to her feet.

"She's ready to go." The rat that had tied her up told the large one, no doubt the leader of this pack.

Said leader grunted in acknowledgment. "Strip the carriage of any booty you can find, then we head back to Exile."

Exile.

That confirmed it; these were no ordinary bandits.

And she was *damned*.

"Found another one!" Another voice shouted from behind the carriage, accompanied by a frightened scream.

She looked up just in time to see one of the bandits dragging along a small mouse by her hair, unfazed by her pathetic attempts to struggle against her captors. That got the attention of several of the rats around them, their wicked eyes staring at her with dark, hungry gazes, some of them outright eyeing her as if she was flesh to be eaten.

The leader nodded with approval. "Bring her back as well." He told them.

"No!" The young rat cried in desperation, watching in horror as the bandits began to gather around the helpless mouse. "You got me! I'm the one you want! Let her go!"

"SHUT UP!" The rat pinning her to the ground shouted, delivering a painful kick directly to her stomach, causing her to gasp as the air was knocked out of her lungs.

Thoooom…

"I'd worry more about *myself* if I were you." The bandit leader…no…the *barbarian* leader growled cruelly, eyes gleaming with evil intent.

Thoooom…

"She's mine!" The one who had found her snarled at the others, swiping angrily at them when they tried to reach for her, all the while ignoring her pleas for mercy.

Thoooom…

The nearby puddle of blood, formed from the body of one of the fallen guards, began to ripple with a steady vibration…

THOOOOM!

"What *is* that?"

That was all the so-called bandit who had positioned himself over the mouse got to say before a shadow fell over his form, followed by the large, clawed hand-paw that swatted him from the side, sending him sailing through the air and crashing into a nearby tree trunk, which he splattered against it like an overripe tomato.

And that was the moment Princess Isabella joined the many, many rodentkin whose lives would be turned upside down by the arrival of Jendovahzoor.

Mere rage could not describe what Spyro felt as he lowered his blood-soaked paw back to the ground, beholding the scene in front of him with eyes that burned with literal flame.

He was currently standing in a clearing in the forest, on what was clearly part of a road, and before him was a scene straight out of an adventurer's fairytale: a regal-looking carriage stood at the side of the road, with what was clearly a royal emblem on the flag hanging off the back, surrounded by a group of bandits. The occupant of the carriage, a beautiful lady rat in an

equally-regal dress, had been forced out of the carriage and pinned to the ground, her arms and legs bound in rope. There was also the young mouse he had just freed; a furling just a few years older than Teresa, dressed in a commoner's dress and maid-apron. The rats maid-servant, no doubt.

It was like a scene from the stories: where the dashing hero would swoop in, slay the evil bandits, and save both the princess and the day.

A classic setup for glory.

Except…this wasn't a story.

And there was nothing even remotely glorious about this.

There had been guards accompanying the carriage, but they were all no more. Their bodies littered the ground around the carriage in pools of their own blood; some had been killed swift and cleanly by precise blade, but others had died slowly and painfully; some had been outright disemboweled, their guts spilled across the earth. Truly a disgusting and rage-inducing sight.

But what had angered him the most, what had set his draconic fury off more than even the deaths of the guards, was the scene he had just interrupted.

He might have been young by dragon terms, but fifty years was still a very long time to be in the world. More than enough time to truly learn the horrors that it held, especially with his experiences in the Dragon Realms. So, it wasn't hard to guess just what these rodents had in mind for their captives, especially given the positions they were being held down in.

What gave them the right to do this? By what word were these barbarians entitled to take the lives of all these souls?! *By what God did they believe themselves wordlessly entitled to the touch of another?!*

These were *not* rats. Not the kind he knew from the Veil Piercer.

They were *monsters*, pure and simple.

And there was only one way to deal with monsters.

He stepped forward to where he was standing protectively over the furling he had just saved, who was understandably frozen in shock at the mere sight of him; he made sure that his limb blocked her from the view of these animals in rat skin, all of whom looked torn, as if unable to decide what to do: to either run away in pure terror, or to attack to stop their plans from being thwarted. Were they truly that devoted to their task at hand? Or was it something else keeping them in place? Well, he had the means to make them decide:

He lifted his head high, spreading his wings behind him for even greater intimidation effect, and roared at the top of his lungs.

The distant roar exploded across the sky like a clap of thunder, primal and powerful, vibrating through Mrs. Brisby's very bones. She nearly stumbled mid-bound from the sheer tremble it sent through the ground, causing nearby pebbles to tremble against the dirt, but she quickly caught her footing again and raced down the path Spyro had left in his wake. Only seconds after the roar had sounded was it followed by the sounds of battle; she could hear shouts of rage coming from the direction he had gone in, as well as clashing swords and cries of pain.

What was going on? Was Spyro attacking someone? Why? And who on earth would travel this close to the border?

All of these questions were answered when she made her way to the road and pushed her way out of the underbrush, only to gasp in alarm at the sight before her.

Spyro was locked in combat with several rats, though to say it was a fair fight would be a lie: the large fox-sized dragon was swatting them aside like ragdolls as they charged him, while their rusted swords struck his scales to no effect. The rats were vicious with cruel eyes and jagged teeth, their armor barbaric in nature and their weapons wicked in shape. But the sight that caught her attention the most was that of the young mouse trying desperately to chew through the ropes that bound the young lady rat next to the tipped carriage.

With a mighty swing of his tail, the dragon sent three of the rats up into the trees, causing them to rip into branches or slam against trunks with bloody impacts. He lifted his foreleg to promptly crush another underfoot, but it scurried out of the way just in time, swinging its dagger with all its might; the blade rang loudly as it struck the scales, not a scratch made. The rodent was rewarded for his 'bravery' with a set of tooth-filled jaws clamping down around his torso, crushing his ribs like pretzel sticks. Another rat came at him from behind, aiming his arrow for the back of the dragon's head, only for Spyro to kick backwards, sending him flying.

While the roars of battle continued on, Mrs. Brisby snuck around the chaos with mousey stealth, scurrying across the road and around the carnage until she made her way to the carriage. The mouse spotted her approaching, her eyes going wide with instinctive fear of a stranger.

"It's alright! I'm here to help!" Brisby assured her in a hushed tone, coming up to them and getting to work on the ropes: being older and Feral-Born, her teeth chewed through the ropes more effectively than the younger Pureblood's. Within a few seconds, the ropes binding her wrists were severed.

"WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?!" The leader of the barbarians roared when he spotted Brisby helping their captor. Brisby gasped as the gigantic rat, one almost as large as Justin's friend Brutus, came at her with his weapon drawn.

That was his last mistake.

He barely had the time to raise his weapon above his head before he was seized in a cloud-like aura of purple and magenta magic, freezing his body in place. Brisby looked over to see Spyro standing there, the grooves of his horns and his eyes alike glowing with the same color as the magic aura. The dragon growled in anger before his horns flashed with light, and the bandit's body was suddenly twisted several times around, as if he was wringing out a towel. He then tossed the permanently-disfigured corpse away, where it landed with a bloody splatter.

That was it for the rest of them. Whatever force that was making them fight despite their fear was finally beaten by said fear, and at the sight of their leader's demise they dropped their weapons and began to flee down the path.

But Spyro had no intention of letting any of them escape. Not after what they attempted to do.

The first thing Mrs. Brisby felt was the heat, which quickly began to rise in the air around them, followed by the sight of the dragon's chest glowing orange through the grooves of his chest-scales. Spyro took a step back as he reared backwards, spreading his wings as the hot-orange glow began to rise up his neck all the way to his throat, which began to glow from behind his teeth, while the very air around his mouth warbled with the heat.

It was all the mouse could do to brace herself for what was to come.

And come it did; Spyro's head lunged forward and from his jaws billowed out a full-blown tidal wave of fire, roaring as loud as he did. The river of flames washed across the ground and rushed down the path, quickly overtaking the fleeing rats; their screams lasted for a total of five seconds before the hungry flames consumed them entirely, their very skeletons and even their armor reduced to blackened clouds of ash and pools of molten metal.

The blaze lasted for a few more seconds before Spyro closed his jaws, cancelling his breath of fire before he burnt the entire forest to the ground.

Mrs. Brisby could've sworn her fur and whiskers had been burned off from proximity alone, though a quick feel around her tender face and nose confirmed everything was still in place, albeit rather toasty. The soil of the path had been seared black where the flames had touched, with a few patches of grass still on fire and burning away. Almost all of the bodies, both of the bandits and the guards, had been completely burned away in the process as well, all that remained were red-hot pieces of armor bubbling in the road, along with a few weapons that had been scattered out of the way, and thus spared the dragon’s fiery wrath.

Spyro gave an animalistic growl of satisfaction, the glow of his eyes returning to normal as he glared in the direction the rats had attempted to flee in.

Good riddance.

"Elizabeth?"

Spyro turned in the direction of the new voice, which had been spoken by the rat lady he had rescued. Mrs. Brisby had just finished chewing off the ropes that had bound her ankles and was now looking up at her in surprised recognition.

"Isabella?" She asked in surprise.

"Oh, Elizabeth!" This 'Isabella' exclaimed as she scooped up the smaller mouse in a tight hug. "Thank Frith it's you!"

Elizabeth squeaked in embarrassment and from the tightness of the hug.

"I-It's okay, Isabella. You're safe now." The mother mouse comforted her the best she could from her position, gently patting her head. Spyro turned himself around to face the rodents, to which the younger mouse gave a frightened whimper as she ducked behind the other two, eyes wide with fright.

"It's alright. He's with me." Mrs. Brisby assured them, much to their surprise.

"He's…he's a *dragon*!" Isabella whispered in awe. "A *real dragon*!"

Mrs. Brisby nodded. "Yes. His name is Spyro, and he's very kind." She then turned to Spyro, who cocked his head to the side in an innocent manner. "Spyro, this is Isabella, an old friend of mine from Rosebush City."

From where she was listening through the Speaking Crystal in Mrs. Brisby's skirt pocket, Zoe's eye began to twitch.

"Isabella…as in *Princess* Isabella?" she asked Auntie Shrew in dread. "Current Great Granddaughter of King Nicodemus and heir to the throne?!"

Auntie Shrew nodded with a hint of pride, though concern was written all over her face as well. "Yes, the very same."

The fairy could only groan in exasperation.

Chapter 18: Arrival to Dapplewood

Chapter Text

“I *knew* it! I *knew* the fairies were hiding something!”

“We weren’t so much hiding him as we were protecting *him.”* Zoe explained from the opposite seat of the carriage, where the Speaking Crystal had been laid at an angle that allowed the fairy to speak directly to them. She then looked to the side in bemusement. *“Even if the methods were a little extreme.”*

Isabella nodded, practically bouncing with excitement where she sat. “I knew it had to be something big to justify closing the borders entirely, but I never would’ve imagined *this*!”

Mrs. Brisby smiled at Isabella’s spirit, even as she helped apply the soothing aloe to the rat’s bruises; it was good to see the princess in high spirits despite having just experienced such a horrid event. It had been quite the story to explain to them, but it had been done with Zoe’s help. Currently, they were all in the carriage, where Mrs. Brisby and the young mouse were busy helping bandage Isabella’s bruises. Spyro, meanwhile, laid across the path in patient waiting, watching the rodentkin out of the corner of his eye.

“I mean, there hasn’t been a dragon in Nimh since…well, *ever*! Ow.” Isabella winced as her maid gently rubbed aloe on the bruise adorning her cheek.

“Sorry, princess.” The young mouse apologized quietly; unlike the excited Isabella, she was understandably very shaken from nearly being forced upon, as well as having her entire world thrown upside down by the presence of a living dragon. She hadn’t said much during the entire conversation, instead sending small, shy glances to Spyro every now and then.

Spyro, on the other hand, pretended not to notice, turning his own gaze away every time she looked his way, though he did take the opportunity to give her a look over when she wasn't paying attention to him. She was a darker-furred mouse than Brisby was, with dark-brown fur and a lighter-colored highlights and underbelly; unlike the Brisbies, however, she had a head of hair much like that of a human, most of it tied back in a large ponytail. She was dressed in a commoner's dress that consisted of a yellow-tan shirt and a light-brown skirt.

Mrs. Brisby smiled warmly at her. "And what's your name?" She asked kindly.

The mouse seemed surprised at being addressed, but ultimately lowered her head and murmured softly.

"Tanya." She told them.

"It's nice to meet you, Tanya." Mrs. Brisby told her.

"She's my personal handmaid." Isabella explained, smiling warmly at the younger mouse. "And my best friend."

"P-Princess, p-please." Tanya stammered, lowering her blushing face to where her bangs covered the top half of it.

"What? It's true." The princess said, unashamed of this fact.

Zoe cocked an eyebrow through the image of the crystal, folding her arms across her chest. *"So, what brings the granddaughter of Nicodemus this close to the border?"*

"Oh, we were on our way to Dapplewood to assist in the Moving Day essentials." Isabella explained, holding her arm out as Brisby wrapped it up in gauze. Her smile fell as she recalled the reason she was being bandaged in the first place.

Zoe caught on quickly. *"But then you were ambushed…and from the looks of it, it was an ambush that had been planned far in advance."* She glanced

out of the carriage's open doors, to where pools of blood and piles of ashes remained scattered across the ground; Spyro's fiery breath had taken care of the bodies that would've otherwise been left for the scavengers of the forest, both of the guards and of the attackers. Isabella looked out over the pile of ashes that now lay scattered across the ground, most notably the one that had once been her coachman.

"I've known Nathaniel since I was a child…" The princess muttered sadly. "…I trusted him with my life."

"And that trust was betrayed in the name of gold." Zoe said simply. *"It appears your grandfather has some cleaning of house to do; to find the traitors hiding amongst his men."*

"Zoe…" Mrs. Brisby scolded.

"I'm only stating the truth of the matter." The fairy said back, motioning to the scene outside. *"This was clearly a set-up between these bandits and someone on the inside. Someone with access to knowledge of where the princess was going and how many guards would be accompanying her. Who and why are questions you'll have to ask when you return to Rosebush City."*

Isabella merely nodded. She then perked up a little, as an idea entered her head:

"If it is not too much to ask, would you accompany us to Dapplewood?" She offered Mrs. Brisby, clasping her paws in her own, much to Brisby's surprise. "We're both going there, and with Spyro around we wouldn't have to worry about any more attacks."

That was true, Mrs. Brisby thought to herself. Plus, travelling the rest of the way to Dapplewood in a carriage sounded far more relaxing and enjoyable than experiencing another second on dragon-back.

"What do you think, Spyro?" She asked the dragon.

Spyro gave the carriage a look over before ultimately closing his eyes and lifting himself off the ground.

"If that's what you wish." He stated, lifting his claws to scratch at the ropes around his chest, severing them with little effort, which in turn allowed Johnathan's saddle to side off his back. He caught it with a paw before it landed on the ground, setting it on top of the carriage's roof amongst the rest of the baggage.

With the original coachman dead, Tanya took up the role of coach-mouse, using the reigns to guide the pair of pygmy rabbits back onto the main path. The two domesticated ferals had been shaken from the whole ordeal themselves, and being in the presence of a fox-sized dragon was not helping in the slightest. But with a little comforting and guidance, the two animals were able to reassume the journey to Dapplewood. All the while, Spyro followed by their side, keeping an eye on them and their surroundings.

Apart from his presence, it was a picture-ese scene: of a royal mouse-scaled carriage making its way down the path of the enormous forest.

"I heard about what happened to Johnathan." Isabella told Mrs. Brisby after a moment of silence. "You have my deepest condolences."

Mrs. Brisby nodded, her gaze downcast.

"Thank you." She murmured. "It hasn't been easy, knowing he won't come back, but things have been getting better."

"Do you need help with your home? With your crops and such? If so, grandfather and I can send some help to aid your family." Isabella offered.

The mouse shook her head. "Actually, things have been going very well with the farming, thanks to Spyro and Zoe." She explained, to which Zoe puffed up a little with pride. "You should've seen how quickly Spyro made off with the old cornstalks; it was surreal, having so much done in a few hours."

“He knows how to farm, then?”

“Well, not exactly.” She explained. “He was able to clear out the fields of the old crops, but he doesn’t know how to till the soil or plant seeds.”

The young rat hummed in thought. “Well, sounds like he’s been a big help either way.”

Mrs. Brisby smiled. “He has.”

“It’s truly *a shame the rest of Nimh won’t see him that way.”* Zoe stated simply.

That brought a solemn mood to the inside of the carriage, Isabella nodding softly in agreement. “I can only imagine how my *cousin* would react if he ever found out.” She said the word ‘cousin’ with heavy distaste. “So, I take it the plan is to keep him away from Dapplewood, then?”

“Since the children didn’t come, I don’t intend to stay for very long.” Mrs. Brisby told her with a nod. “Just long enough to get the supplies I need for this year’s harvest.”

“You don’t intend to stay for Moving Day?” Isabella asked, looking a touch disappointed.

“I can’t.” Mrs. Brisby told her, shaking her head softly. “Timmy is sick, and he and the rest of my family are waiting for me back home. I’m just going to go to market, get what I need, and then we’ll head back to the Lee of the Stone. Spyro will stay hidden in the forest until I’m done.”

“At least let us to help you while you’re there.” The young rat offered. “It’s the least we can do in return for all you’ve done for us.”

The mouse smiled in return. “I’d like that.”

Spyro surveyed the landscape around them with an air of animalistic edge, his eyes glowing in the dim light beneath the canopy. It was hard to make

out things in the distance, due to all the trees and undergrowth covering the earth, along with the setting sun (though the growing darkness meant little to his night vision), but where his eyes couldn't reach, his ears and sense of smell could: the only sounds to be heard were the rolling of the wheels and the chorus of life throughout the forest, and there was nothing suspicious to be smelled in the air. It appeared that all traces of the bandits had disappeared in his flames.

But it never hurt to be safe.

He felt a pair of eyes on him and he glanced over to the carriage, where he spotted Tanya watching him with eyes that held a natural level of fear, and yet a rather large amount of genuine curiosity. Her cheeks went red as being caught staring and she quickly looked away, pretending (and failing) to not be bothered by the dragon's fiery stare.

"You said your name was Tanya, correct?" He asked simply, wondering if she wanted to say something.

Tanya visibly jumped in her seat at the sound of his voice, giving a hiccup of a squeak as she did so. Understandable why: even when trying to keep quiet and friendly, his voice rumbled like a distant peal of thunder.

"Y-…Y-Yes." The young mouse muttered nervously, wringing her paws around the reins she held.

Spyro gave a small huff of confirmation.

"It's a pretty name." He told her honestly, turning his gaze back to the road.

This time Tanya's entire face went red, and she found herself hiding it behind her hands; it wasn't every day someone just up and complimented her in such a causal manner.

"How do you fare?" He then asked. ***"After the attack, I mean? Are your injuries bothering you?"***

“No. They’re not.” She told him, her bashfulness fading away as the memories returned to her mind. “But I’m not doing that great. Sorry.”

“To apologize for something that's beyond your control is an unnecessary act.” The dragon told her. ***“I, for one, am glad I got there in time, before the bandits succeeded in their dark desires.”***

“They weren’t bandits.”

That comment got Spyro’s attention, and he looked back at the mouse. “What do you mean?”

“I heard them talking about taking us to Exile.” Tayna continued, her voice heavy with dread. “That means they weren’t bandits…they were *Skaven*.”

Spyro cocked his head to the side.

“What are ‘Skaven’?” He asked, though merely saying the word itself left a dark feeling in his back of his mind.

Tanya looked up at him, her face one of surprise. “You don’t know?” She asked. When Spyro simply stared back, she explained: “They say the Skaven were like us once, ordinary Nimh rats and mice, a long time ago. Criminals and other such wrong-doers who were banished to the Isle of Exile for their crimes. The stories say that they found and made a deal with the…” She paused, shivering. “…the *Unspoken One*, exchanging their souls for his dark power, giving up everything that made them rodentkin in the name of their dark master’s gifts. They have no souls: no sense of morality, no love for anything, no fear of death. Only hate and evil desires in their hearts.”

That explained why they believed themselves capable of facing a threat like him to begin with, and continued to fight even as they were getting crushed like insects.

“But I don’t understand.” She continued. “The Skaven were defeated by King Nicodemus centuries ago. How could they be back? And how did they know where to find us?”

"Your former coachman led you all into a trap he set with them. That part is no mystery." Spyro told her. ***"As for their return, a few centuries are more than enough to rebuild one's strength and numbers. Perhaps they sought to capture Isabella as revenge against Nicodemus."***

"I suppose so…" Tanya murmured as she looked down, looking a little unsure.

The dragon didn't press the matter further, understanding that she probably didn't want to talk about it anymore than she had to. And who could blame her? She had come so close to being…taken advantage of (even he couldn't bring himself to use the word); it was a traumatic experience for all of them. Even he, the hero who saved the day, felt a burning weight in his chest at the thought of it all. Who knows what they must be feeling right now.

"Thank you."

The dragon paused at that, turning to look at the mouse in surprise.

"I-I just realized: I never thanked you for saving us." Tanya said softly, her eyes warm despite the fear and trauma. "You stopped it all from happening. You saved us. Not just from the Skaven, but all of Exile…and that's more than we could ever repay you for."

There was a lot he could've said in response to that. A lot of things came to mind; excuses for his actions, comparing himself to others, claiming anything under the sun. But at the end of it all, he couldn't bring himself to start something he wasn't sure he could finish.

So, he simply said: ***"You're Welcome."*** And left it at that.

The next hour or so was spent in silence as they continued on their way, broken only by the songbirds in the trees around them. Then, at the hour mark of their journey, something caught his eye and turned his attention up to the road ahead, which reached its end at this part of the forest: the forest before them opened into a large glade through which a stream flowed, its waters sparkling in the sunlight, across which several bridges had been built at numerous points. The scattered trees throughout the glade had small

doors and windows carved out of their trunks, still alive yet made into homes for all living here, with numerous pathways of dirt covering the ground; it was a town that had been built as part of the forest itself, rather than clearing it out for its own. The evening sun cast an almost magical light over the village, the distant sky painted with all the colors of the twilight rainbow, while the warm glow of candles shone from behind windows and on the corners of the streets.

It was a peaceful view. One that invoked a feeling of belonging within the young dragon's soul.

A feeling that, sadly, he knew he could not indulge.

"What does that sign say?"

"Huh? Oh." Tanya looked up in confusion, only to see what he was so focused on. There, up in the path, stood a small sign by the side of the road, upon which were carved a name in large letters: Dapplewood. They had finally arrived. "It says Dapplewood."

"Then we have arrived." Spyro stated, halting with a final step, which prompted Tanya to do the same, tugging gently at the reins to stop the rabbits.

"We're here?" Isabella asked, poking her head out of the carriage window.

"Yes, your highness." Tanya answered.

"Ah, *finally*!" The rat said as she opened the door, all but jumping out of the carriage. "Another moment in that carriage and my legs would've fallen off!"

Mrs. Brisby followed soon after, taking her time to gingerly step out, Speaking Crystal in paw. "Be careful, Isabella! You'll agitate your bruises."

"Can you take care of yourselves from here?" Spyro asked as he overlooked Dapplewood, taking a small step backwards, even as his eyes gleamed in the setting sunlight.

Mrs. Brisby knew why he was asking such a question, even if said reason saddened her deeply.

“Yes. We can.” She told him. “There’s an Inn that I stay at whenever I visit.” She pointed out towards one of the trees. “There, just across the first bridge.”

The dragon merely gave a croon of acknowledgement before he turned around and began to head back the way their came, heading for the undergrowth that lined the path; they watched as the last of his long tail slid into the brush and all traces of the dragon disappeared, leaving the three rodent girls to the safety of Dapplewood.

The first thing that greeted them as they stepped into the Inn was the warmth of the hearth, banishing the evening chill from their bodies as they made their way inside. The second was a gentle-looking mole rodentkin wearing a pink dress with a tan overdress, along with a pink bandana wrapped around her head and a pair of glasses on the end of her snout.

“Welcome to the Cozy Den.” She greeted the newcomers when she heard the door open. “How may I help-” Her greeting halted when she saw Mrs. Brisby, and her expression became one of worried surprise. “Oh, Elizabeth, it’s you.”

“Hello, Janet.” Elizabeth said as she made her way up to the counter.

“It’s good to see you.” Janet told her, clasping her clawed paws together. “We all heard about what happened to John. You have our deepest condolences. Truly.”

“Thank you.” The mouse said half-heartedly; she expected that she would be hearing many condolences tomorrow. “I’ll have my usual room, if it’s available.”

Janet nodded, before turning to see Isabella and Tanya, who were standing in front of the hearth, warming their paws next to the fire. “Do you two need boarding as well?”

“Yes, please.” Isabella told her. “One room with two beds, if you have it.”

“Of course.” The mole said as she handed Brisby her room-key; a large metal thing that was almost too big to hold in one paw. “Yours will be the first door on the left of the second floor, as usual.”

Mrs. Brisby merely nodded her thanks.

The room was just as she had always seen it before. A small, warm-looking room with a double bed in the center, a writing desk and chair in the corner, and a small coffee table with a single potted flower off to the side. Just as it had always been before.

And yet, it felt so much bigger and much emptier than when she last seen it; the bed, in particular, looked exceptionally large and empty for a now-widowed mouse.

A heavy sigh escaped her lips as she stepped into the room, closing the door behind her. She didn’t say anything as she undressed herself, took a quick bath, and climbed into bed, thoroughly exhausted by the day behind her. However, despite her willingness to sleep, she found herself unable to find it. She lay in the empty-feeling bed, staring at the ceiling in silence and missing the warmth of her lover. She stayed like this for a few minutes before she rolled over in bed, turning her gaze to the window; the sun had disappeared beyond the horizon at this point, though it still painted the skies with the oranges and purples of twilight, the first of the stars starting to come out amongst the light.

A stunning view of the heavens.

Where Johnathan was watching them all from now.

“Can’t sleep?”

Mrs. Brisby jumped in surprise as Zoe’s voice cut through the silence, pulling her blankets up over herself. She looked around, confused, until her eyes fell upon the Speaking Crystal, which sat upon her folded cloak. A soft

blue light was still glowing from the crystal's surface, barely visible under the moonlight. Still keeping her sheet wrapped over her bosom, she reached for the crystal and picked it up in one paw, turning it to see Zoe's face on the other side of the surface, smilingly apologetically.

"H-How long have you been there?" The mouse asked.

Zoe chuckled softly; not out of malice, but mere amusement. *"You never turned the crystal off on your end."* She explained simply.

Mrs. Brisby blushed. "O-Oh…" A moment of awkward silence passed between the two, until Brisby spoke again, this time with a relaxed disposition. "How are the children?"

"They're doing fine." Zoe told her. *"Just got done putting them all to bed and giving Timmy his medicine."*

"That's good." She said as she leaned back against her pillow, an exasperated sigh escaping her as she did so. "After everything that happened today, I need something normal to hear." She told the fairy. "Spyro is truly a remarkable creature…but today was a nothing short of a nightmare." she groaned, running her hands down her face.

"You did pretty well for your first time on dragon-back." Zoe stated.

"Only because he was going easy for me, and even then, it felt like I was being pulled through a hurricane!" Brisby exclaimed. "And then we run into bandits of all things. Don't get me wrong: I'm glad Spyro was able to save Isabella before anything horrible happened to her…but all those poor guards…so many lives lost…"

The fairy sighed herself. *"Forgive me if I sound uncaring towards the loss of all those men: that is not my intention."* She told her in advance. *"But my own concerns lie with Spyro and how he's doing after facing those bandits. We came back to Nimh to get away and heal from war and all its violence, not to get wrapped up in it again."*

Brisby looked off to the side, her gaze cast downwards. “It was very brave of him.” she ultimately muttered, looking back at the crystal. “To do what he did.”

“If you mean that, then tell that to him, not me.” Zoe almost snapped in response. *“Frith knows he needs it more than I do.”*

Mrs. Brisby merely nodded in response.

The image of the crystal began to flicker, as if it was unraveling from within. Zoe’s gaze followed the rim of the image. *“The Crystal’s running out of mana. We’ll have to wrap this up for the night.”* She told her, reaching up to cover the image with her hand. *“Leave the gemstone in a source of light so it may recharge…and check on Spyro at least once for me tomorrow, would you?”*

“O-oh, of course.” The mouse said softly as the image faded completely, the magical blue light and color snuffing out until the crystal was as grey and lifeless as a rock. She got out of bed and placed the now-dead crystal on the nearby writing desk, where the moonlight was shining over.

Nodding with approval, she then crawled back into bed and merely watched the starry sky through the window until she drifted off to sleep.

While they spoke, the topic of their conversation found himself in a clearing in the forest, where a single acorn tree stood in the center of a small glade, with large ferns and bushes covering the ground. His glowing eyes and many other senses picked up no signs of animal life nearby, and barely even any insect life to be detected; no doubt scared off by his presence.

This would do.

He slinked towards the tree in a feline-like manner, instinctively flicking his tongue in the air as he did so. There were no signs of the villagers or any sentries to be seen, allowing him to slip up to it without being detected. As he approached, he saw how weak the tree looked; a slim, crooked thing that was dwarfed by the forest canopy, with slightly shriveled leaves and small,

unripe acorns. There were a few ripe-looking acorns to be seen here and there, but apart from that the tree was nowhere near as strong and healthy as the rest of the forest.

A deep grumble purred from his throat as he approached, looking up towards the branches above him, the leaves casting beams of moonlight across the center of the glade. It was a shriveled, ugly thing…and yet, there was something about it that gave off a comforting aura, like the company of an elderly relative.

The dragon quietly made his way to the base of the tree, where a number of giant ferns were growing around it; he pushed aside said ferns and slipped into the space beneath their leaves, slithering across the ground as he laid himself down like a giant cat, resting his head next to one of the tree's roots. His eyes began to glow a light lime-green in color as he extended his will to the plants around him; they began to shift in place or even grow outwards so that their leaves covered any part of the dragon that was still visible, wrapping him up in a blanket of green, hidden completely from prying eyes.

He sighed a deep, guttural sigh, the glow of his eyes dimming slightly as they slowly closed, looking to all the world like he was asleep.

But though his body longed for slumber, his mind was abuzz with activity, his thoughts focused on the day behind them and all that had transpired during it…and to his current state of being:

He was outside the border.

Outside of Feywild.

Just thinking about it made it feel like a dream in itself. Not in all his years had he ever expected to see the rest of Nimh beyond the borders of the Fae Lands, let alone taking part in the lives of the rodentkin. And yet, here he was, resting under an unfamiliar canopy in an unfamiliar forest.

He wondered if King Oberon had taken notice of his absence from the kingdom yet. And if so, how were he and other fairies going to respond?

Not with happiness, he knew that much; he could only imagine how certain members of the Council would take the news. And he couldn't pretend like they wouldn't find out eventually: Mrs. Brisby, the Lee of the Stone, all of it…they would find out, more likely sooner than later.

And when that day came…well…he wasn't sure what he was going to do.

Except for one thing: he was going to protect Mrs. Brisby and her family from any fae who would dare raise their sword towards them.

That, he was sure of. Perhaps the only thing he was truly sure of.

Those were the last conscious thoughts that passed through his mind as it slowly slipped into darkness, and he fell asleep under the moonlight.

Chapter 19: Furling Frenzy

Chapter Text

THE NEXT MORNING:

The night passed without issue, and Spyro found himself awakening to the sunlight shining through the leaves of his makeshift cover. He gave off an animalistic groan as the light flickered across his closed eyes, his lips curling into a snarl as he was stirred from his rest. He tried to shift his head away from the glare, to reclaim sweet slumber before it was lost entirely, but it was an ultimately pointless effort; with a huff of disappointment, he rolled over onto his stomach, head still resting on the ground, and slowly cracked his eyes open, blinking away the harsh glare of the morning sun.

It took him a moment to remember where he was, as the forest around him was unfamiliar at first. Then he recalled the events of the day before, and he settled down in a content comfort: this was Dapplewood, the woods of the Rodentkin. They had stepped beyond the borders of Feywild and ventured into the world of Nimh.

He gave a guttural croon of curiosity as he lifted his head off the ground and looked about himself, taking in the view of the rodentkin forest in the light of the sun.

To the eye alone, it wouldn't have looked that much different than the forest of Feywild. Trees, grass, birdsong, it was all the same. But to one who could sense the flow of magic itself, it felt very barren in that regard. Unlike the fae lands, which were ripe and flowing richly with natural sources of magic, these trees had little to no magic flowing through them at all. And to one who had spent his life where magic was abundant, it was a very strange, very alien feeling.

And yet, at the same time, it was oddly familiar. To something deep down in his blood, passed down from those who came before him.

But those were thoughts for another time; he wanted to see this strange new world he had journeyed into, and he wasn't going to do that lying here.

The leafy cover he had made was torn away as he tucked his legs under himself before standing up on all fours. He flexed his wings to shake off the last of the leaves that clung to his scales, sending a gust of wind blowing across the glade. The nearby songbirds, who had previously been singing to the morning sun, all fell silent at the sight of the massive beast, plunging the glade into a deathly stillness, where not even insects made a single chirp.

Spyro stared up at the now-silent canopy and gave a snort of annoyance, smoke shooting out his nostrils, before turning away and heading into the deeper forest.

Roughly the same time Spyro woke up, another was stirring from the depths of slumber herself; the light of the early morning sun cast itself through the window of the inn's bedroom, rising Elizabeth from her own sleep. Unlike the much lazier dragon, though, she was ready to rise the moment she opened her eyes, yawning heavily as she did. Years of living as a farm-mouse had trained her to wake with the sun and today was no different.

The first thing she did after getting out of bed was to head down to the inn's public bathroom and give herself a good bath, washing away the dirt and grime of yesterday, leaving her feeling much better than before.

One thing she did take notice was the abundance of other guests that were bathing in the same room as her, gathered around the small pool that made up the female wash area. She recognized a small few, but most of the others were strangers: mice, rats, squirrels, moles, hedgehogs, and other such Enlightened members of the Rodentkin. Most of them were visitors from outside of Dapplewood, much like herself, who had come for Moving Day. She shyly avoided everyone, preferring to bathe in the corner of the pool; even in the presence of other females, she was always bashful to be seen naked.

After her wash, she got herself dressed in a spare, freshly-clean dress she had packed for just this purpose and set out for the farmer's market, saying

goodbye to Janet on her way out.

The light chill of the early spring morning dusted her damp fur with a soft caress, making her shiver a little as she made her way down the path to the main street. The sun had barely risen from behind the distant mountain range, and yet the small town was already bustling with much activity. Refugees of all rodentkin species filled the streets, forming flowing crowds in either direction, seeking shelter and supplies for Moving Day.

Elizabeth was thankful for her small size, for once; it made it easier to weave in and out of the crowd as she made her way to her own destination: a vendor that she and Johnathan always purchased seeds from. The vendor's owner, a grizzled-looking wood mouse, looked up in recognition as she approached the stand.

"Brisby! It's been a while!" He said in a naturally gruff voice.

Elizabeth gave a cordial smile in return. "Hello, Samuel. It's good to see you."

Samuel simply waved her off. "Please, call me Sam." He told her. He then gave her a sympathetic look. "Heard 'bout what happened to John. I'm sorry it happened; he was a good mouse."

Her smile fell as she gave a heavy yet quiet sigh, as not to insult her fellow mouse; as kind as everyone was giving her their respects for Johnathan's death, it was starting to get disheartening. The constant reminder that her love was dead wasn't helping her heart heal from it.

"Thank you." She said, almost robotically. She then cleared her throat, coughing into her fist. "I'll take my usual seed order."

"Sure thing." Sam said as he turned to his stock and began to gather the bags of seeds. Mostly corn seeds, but also including seeds for wheat and carrots. He gathered all the separate seed pouches and placed them all in a single bag, then set the bag on the counter. "That'll be twenty gold."

Elizabeth froze, taken aback. "T-Twenty?" She stammered. "Isn't it normally ten?"

The wood-mouse shrugged. "It used to be." He said simply.

The doe swallowed a lump in her throat. She knew what this was: Johnathan was always emotionally stronger between the two of them; the one not afraid to put his foot down and confront someone he knew was trying to do him wrong. He was the one who had always handled bargaining with the traders, firmly demanding that the prices be charged fairly.

But Johnathan wasn't here anymore. And she wasn't nearly as assertive and strong-willed as he had been.

And Sam knew it.

In fact, they all knew it, she realized with a steadily growing pit of dread forming in her stomach. If Sam was willing to take advantage of her loss like this, what was stopping the rest of the vendors from doing the same? They all knew Johnathan was gone, and they knew that she wouldn't be able to make a stand for herself as he did. They would drain her of what little gold she had in no time.

How was she going to get the things her family needed? How-?

"Robbing a widow of her livelihood now that her husband's gone? Now *that's* not very gentlemanly at all."

That's when a new voice made itself known; one that cut through her growing panic like a knife, severing all ties it had over her heart. She gave a heavy sigh of relief as she turned around to see none other than Justin standing just behind her, hands folded behind his back as he eyed the seed vendor with a look of disapproval, like a disappointed parent scolding their child. His eyes briefly darted to her, and he gave her a quick smile and playful wink.

Sam's eyes widened in surprise. "C-Captain Justin!" He stammered fretfully, looking like a deer caught in the light of a carriage's lanterns. "P-

Pardon me, sir! I-I didn't see you there!"

"I'm sure you didn't." Justin said in the same calm voice as before, a smug smile forming on his face. "Just as I'm sure you didn't mean to take advantage of a poor doe in need of a few seeds, is that right?"

As he spoke, Elizabeth took a moment to look over her friend, refreshing his appearance in her mind. He was a tall, handsome rat, almost twice as tall as she was, with light-brown fur and sandy-brown countershade on his underbelly and lower face. He was currently dressed in his usual blue shirt with tan sleeves and collar, along with some armor of his rank: he was the type who always preferred to wear light armor when going into battle, thus there was more leather than steel to it. His sword hung in the scabbard on his hip, ready to be drawn at a moment's notice. His brown eyes were currently angry at the vendor but would become warm whenever he looked to her.

"O-Of course, sir!" Sam stammered, pushing the bag of seeds toward Elizabeth, who couldn't stop a small smile of amusement from forming on her lips as she took it. It felt a bit mean, taking satisfaction in his discomfort, but after what he tried to pull she would allow herself this time. "H-Here, on the house!"

Elizabeth blinked, surprised he went that far. "Are you sure?" she asked. "I can pay the normal price."

"*N-No need!*" The wood-mouse exclaimed, rather suddenly, his eyes nervously darting between her and the captain of the royal guard. "It's no problem, really!"

"I'm sure it isn't." Justin agreed, to which the doe could only give a sigh of humored exasperation. In the end, she simply took the seeds without saying another word and left; Justin gave Sam one final stink-eye before he left to follow her, finally giving the poor vendor a chance to breathe, as well as to mourn the loss of his inventory.

"You didn't have to scare him like that." Elizabeth said, almost scoldingly, holding the seed-bag close to her chest.

"And sit back while a lovely maiden is preyed upon like a feral beast? I don't think so." Justin said without missing a beat.

Elizabeth couldn't stop the giggle from bubbling out her throat, and she hid the smile behind her fingers; still the same smooth, charming ladies-man she had met all those years ago. "It's good to see you, Justin."

The brown-furred rat smiled. "Always a pleasure, Biff."

The bushes rustled as Spyro pushed his way back into the clearing with the old oak tree, using his wings to push them aside so he could step through, tearing off a few leaves as he did so. His jaws were covered in the blood of his prey; an unfortunate feral rabbit that had the misfortune of crossing his path (he could tell it was a feral by looking at their eyes). It had given him a bit of exercise, having to chase it down, but in the end, it was a successful hunt.

He made his way back to the tree and laid down next to it in the same manner a cat or dog would, his tail curling around to form a half circle to his left. His long, forked tongue slid out from between his teeth as he absentmindedly licked some of the blood off his scaly lips; the succulent taste of rabbit teased his tastebuds, and he purred with delight. It had been a delicious meal, and his belly was properly full. Now he was ready to start the day proper…

…but what *was* he going to do, exactly?

He turned his head to look about the glade, giving a small saurian croon as he did so; the morning light shone through the canopy above, casting an almost magical light throughout it. It was quite different from the forests he was used to: the forests of Feywild always had a more magical feel to it, with sights and sounds that were far more mystical in nature, far different from these woods. These felt more…*earthly*, for lack of a better term. Less overly fancy and more down to earth; he assumed that was thanks to the glaring absence of magic that had been nagging at him since they left Feywild.

It truly was a strange new world, these lands.

And he wanted to see it all. Everything these new lands had to offer. The world of the Rodentkin and what strange new wonders it had to offer him. Last time he had a chance to see another world outside of Feywild, it had been under the burden of fighting a war against the Gnorcs; the memories of the lands he traversed and the sights he saw were mudded by the sensations of pain and burning heat of his own wrath. His first real adventure had been tainted. A stain on the tapestry of his life.

This was his chance to have a *real* adventure. To actually enjoy the journey of life.

But could he? The more his desire to embark on a real adventure grew, the more the warnings the Fae had etched into his memory came to mind: warnings of the Rodentkin's cowardice towards everything with sharp teeth. Tales of how the Rats of Nimh would take up their weapons of metal and hunt him down like a common beast of prey; the idea irritated him, and he struck the ground hard with the end of his tail. Once upon a time, he would've simply daydreamed of vanquishing their armies with his fiery-breath, like any real dragon would…but after meeting Mrs. Brisby and the others, such an idea didn't have the same appeal as it once did.

He gave a heavy guttural sigh as he laid his head down on the ground, his eyes drooping sadly. If only everyone would accept him as they had…

Then he heard it; a noise, faint and distant, from beyond the trees that stood across the glade from him, in the direction of Dapplewood. His eyes opened fully, and he lifted his head, looking in the direction of the sound with alert attention; he couldn't make out what it was at first, but after a few seconds it became clearer.

Voices. And a lot of them.

And they were getting closer.

The dragon quickly got up and made his way to the exact same spot he had slept in the night before. He crouched low to the ground and slipped under

the cover of the leaves that had covered him the previous night, the last of his tail slithering under the green as he turned himself around to face the approaching voices. His eyes glowed green again as he willed the plants to cover him completely, concealing him from view, with only the natural golden glow of his eyes peering out from the darkness.

He knew he should run. Get out of there while there was a chance, to avoid being discovered. But his curiosity was peaked; he wanted to see whose voices those belonged to, and why they were coming here.

To see more of this world.

The voices continued to grow closer and closer until, all of a sudden, they came bursting out of the bushes; Spyro flinched a bit in surprise but otherwise didn't move as a large group of furlings came scampering into the glade. A bunch of mostly mice and squirrel rodentkin, a little more than twenty in number, all ranging in the later years of childhood, around Martin and Teresa's ages. They were all making their way to the oak tree, shouting and pushing each other about in attempts to be the first to reach it.

Spyro lowered his head to the ground, his lower jaw touching the dirt, as the furlings all began to climb the tree with gusto, each still trying to best the others. They scurried up into the higher branches, where the last few ripe acorns hung; it was these that they wanted.

No sooner had the first acorn been picked from its branch did the squabbling start; no sooner had it been plucked by one pair of hands did another pair snatch it away, starting what could be described as a giant game of keep away. The cries of childish outrage grew louder as they scrambled around the tree in mass, chasing each other for the coveted prize; the acorns exchanged hands many times, each furlings trying to claim it for themselves, only to have yet another snatch it out of their possession before they could take a bite. All the while a small number of other rodentkin furlings stayed on the ground, cheering their friends on.

Spyro frowned (as much as his saurian face would allow him to, that is), blinking his secondary set of eyelids; were they fighting over them for food? But *why*? Surely the forest yielded more bountiful forms of food than

a few acorns from a dying tree. Why go through all this conflict for a few nuts?

Especially when considering the dangers of climbing: the tree was very tall, and a fall from its height was guaranteed to break a bone or two. Especially to the mice, who normally didn't climb trees.

His attention was eventually drawn to a squabble that was taking place in the branches just in front of his hiding place. One of the mice had one of the larger acorns under his arm; a young boy mouse about Martin's age, with pale-brown fur and a head of darker-brown hair, dressed in a pale-purple shirt. He was about to run out onto one of the branches when one of the squirrels jumped in front of him and tried to grab his prize; a male teenager with orange fur and a sandy-blonde countershade on his underbelly, snout, undertail, and around his eyes, with a blue vest being the only article of clothing he wore. Seemed male rodentkin didn't need as much clothing as the females did.

The mouse boy held tight onto the acorn, resulting in a Tug-of-War. "Hey, I saw it first!" He cried.

The squirrel didn't let up. "You mice are all the same!" He exclaimed. "Greedy little cowards!"

Now that made Spyro angry, and he bared his teeth slightly as a soft growl escaped his throat. When those words reached his ears, his first thoughts were of Mrs. Brisby…and she was no coward by any means, and to claim otherwise was an insult to the bravery she had shown in the River of Bones.

As the two struggled against each other, more joined in; all the mice came up behind the mouse boy and formed a chain, wrapping their arms around each other's waists to form a chain to help him pull, while all the squirrels came up behind the squirrel teen and did the same. It really was one giant game of Tug-of-War at this point.

Then it happened: one of the mice, a girl judging from her voice, had come up from the trunk below trying to get at the nut from beneath them all, but she ended up grabbing the boy's tail by mistake. This led him to lose his

balance and slip out of the grasp of his friends, falling off the branch entirely. The girl furling gave a surprised cry as she was pulled down with him, losing her grip on the bark, and both began to fall to the ground, crying out in fear as they did.

Spyro moved before he even realized it; with the speed of a cheetah, he jumped to his feet and shot forward, bursting out of his hiding place with a flurry of leaves scattering to the air. He extended his neck and reached his head outward just as he had with Mrs. Brisby, moving it beneath the falling furlings just as they reached him. If a pair of rough 'oofs', the two young mice landed on his left eye-ridge, the girl hanging off of it so that her head was in front of his eye. The acorn hit the end of his snout, bouncing off of his nose before tumbling to the ground, rolling away a few yards.

The silence that followed was akin to a graveyard.

The dragon simply stood there, frozen in place under the stares of everyone in the tree and in the glade. If he was capable of facial expressions, he would've had a cringing expression of a child caught with their hand in a cookie jar. His eyes darted about them all, taking in their expressions; every eye was wide with shock and terror, and every face twisted with the emotions, none of them able to so much as move.

Then the two on his head stirred, recovering from their tumble. The girl, who had light-brown fur and a head of hair that was just a slightly-darker color, dressed only in a set of blue overalls, groaned in pain as she scrunched her face in discomfort.

Then she opened her eyes.

There was another brief moment of quiet. She blinked once, as if she was having trouble processing what she was staring directly into the fiery eye of a dragon.

Then she gave a horrified gasp as she recoiled in fear.

Well, sod.

She gave a truly terrified scream. Said scream shot through the glade like an explosion, snapping everyone out of their funks. Spyro recoiled at the closeness of the cry, taking a step back; the motion sent both furlings rolling off his head, falling the rest of the way to the ground. Meanwhile, everyone else gave their own screams and scattered in all directions; those in the tree either scampered down the trunk or outright jumped from the top, while those on the ground wasted no time running for the forest as fast as their paws would carry them. It only took all of them a quick minute to completely clear out, disappearing into the undergrowth lining the glade, their cries of fear echoing through the woods.

Well, almost all of them.

The two mice that had fallen off of him were still there; the girl mouse stared up at him in horror, her eyes wide and her lip trembling, while the boy mouse was still dizzy from the fall, rubbing his head, but as soon as he opened his eyes and saw the dragon, he gave quite the yelp himself, jumping back a good foot.

The girl scrambled to her feet and tried to run, only to fall forward with a cry of pain, landing on her stomach in the dirt. Spyro glanced down at her to spot her left ankle, which was now red and swollen. He grimaced internally; she must've twisted it when she fell off of him. The boy, for all his fear, actually tried to help her to her feet, slinging her arm over his shoulders to give her support, both of them limping away.

That pleased Spyro. Proof that mice were not all 'greedy little cowards'.

"Abagail!" A new voice cried out. Spyro looked up to see two more furlings that hadn't fled, who were running to their friend despite the danger he posed. They were both boys; the first was a hedgehog furling with brown quills and tan countershade on his underbelly and face, dressed in green shorts and a dark-brown vest, a faded-yellow pouch on his back. The second was a mole furling with grey fur, dressed in a large mustard-yellow coat, a red cap, a pair of glasses on his snout, and a large red-and-white striped scarf around his neck.

Wait…they called her *Abagail*…

He *knew* that name.

"Come on! We gotta get outta here!" The hedgehog exclaimed as he rushed to Abagail's other side, slinging her other arm over his own shoulders. The three then moved in unison, accompanied by the fourth staying close by, trying to get away from the monster that had appeared out of the bushes. They didn't get very far before the long, spine-covered tail of the beast suddenly came down from above and blocked their path, hitting the ground with enough force to knock them off their feet. With nowhere to run, the four could only huddle close together in fear, staring up at the dragon with fearful expressions.

Spyro did his best to ignore it as he spoke to them. ***"Your name is Abagail?"***

All four of them jumped as his telepathic voice echoed in their skulls, caught quite off guard by it. Spyro turned himself back to face them, pulling his tail away and laying down on the ground in a cat-like manner again, lessening his height and making himself look calm. This didn't appear to help matters very much, though.

"W-What do you want with us?" The boy mouse asked, his voice trembling yet firm in its own way, a small sliver of bravery seeping through.

Spyro merely cocked his head to the side. ***"Teresa says hello."***

Abagail stopped shaking and perked up in surprise. "H-How do you know that name?"

Spyro simply gave a guttural croon.

The rest of the shopping went very smoothly, despite the rough beginnings.

Elizabeth couldn't help but smile as she and Justin made their way through the marketplace, which had grown much busier as the morning sun rose higher into the sky. In her arms she carried a small crate filled with a number of goods she had gotten: the seeds from before, along with some

new gardening tools and a few knick-knacks for the house. Justin walked beside her, carrying a brand-new hoe and shovel over one shoulder and a crate of more goods under the other arm; thanks to him, she was able to get discounts on many of her purchases, leaving her with a little gold left over. She could buy something nice for the kids with it.

"I'd say you did pretty well for yourself." Justin said as they walked along the middle of the path, staying out of the way of the other shoppers.

Elizabeth gave him an amused look. "Only because I had you looming over my shoulder the entire time." She quipped. "I'm surprised any of them actually charged me with you around."

The rat merely smirked. "I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about."

Elizabeth giggled softly again, her hands too full to cover her mouth this time. As she did, she recalled her days in Rosebush City, when Johnathan first brought her back from the wilds. It had been the first time in her life that she had seen rats, and at first, she had been taken aback with fear at the sight of these 'giant mice' that were bigger than her. But Justin had been kind to her from the moment they met, regardless of her being a Feral-Born; being a close friend of Johnathan's, he had no qualms with his choice in wife whatsoever and proved to be quite the gentleman.

It was little wonder why Isabella was so taken with him.

As they continued on, Justin's smile fell. "Ages told me about Timothy." He told her. "Nasty business, Pneumonia."

The doe nodded in agreement. "Yes. Thankfully, his medicine is helping him greatly." She said. "He should be better by the end of the month."

"That's good to hear." Justin commented, looking relieved, but he soon turned back to concerned. "You sure leaving them now was the best idea?"

That made Elizabeth pause herself. "Auntie Shrew assured me that she had everything taken care of." She told him, deliberately leaving the part about her having Zoe to help. Not like she could just tell the captain of Rosebush

City's royal guard that she had left a *fairy* in charge of her furlings. "And Teresa's old enough to help her now. I have faith they'll be alright." She shifted the crate against her chest, adjusting her arms to a more comfortable position.

That seemed to soothe the rat's worries, though just a touch of concern remained. Which was fair: Auntie Shrew was getting along in her years, and her days of tending to furlings might be coming to an end sooner rather than later.

"Why have *you* come to Dapplewood?" She then asked, partially to change the subject before she revealed anything and partially because she was genuinely curious as to why the captain of the guard was so far away from his charge.

"I'm accompanying Ages on a scouting expedition." Justin told her as he stepped around a passing hedgehog, taking care not to brush against their spikes. "I'm not sure if you've been told this, but there's been evidence of a new Titan Beast roaming the area around the Fitzgibbons Ruins."

Elizabeth's blood ran cold, and she almost paused mid-step. By Frith, she had completely forgotten that Mr. Ages had discovered evidence of Spyro's existence!

"H-He did mention something about that…" She stammered.

"The council's worried about the potential of a new threat to Nimh." Justin continued on, not noticing her change in demeanor. "If it were to stay in Feywild, like we're hoping, then it might not be a problem. But just in case, they've sent me and a squad of my best soldiers to scout out the area near the border; see if we can find anything."

She would've willed herself to disappear into thin air if she could…

This was *bad*. There was an entire squad of Rosebush City's finest soldiers combing the forest for monsters, and she had brought the newest one directly to them! Yes, at the time, she had indeed feared the arrival of a new Titan Beast, but now that she knew it was Spyro she knew there was

nothing to fear. But what if they went looking for him? They didn't know Spyro like she did. They would see him as a threat, and then who knows what would happen.

Would they try to slay him like a dragon in the stories? Or (more likely) would he turn the tables and burn them all to ash like he had those bandits?

Neither outcome ended well for anyone.

A voice called out from the distance, and both looked up to see a group of their companions gathered in the main square of Dapplewood, just in front of the tavern that Elizabeth had previously stayed the night in; Mr. Ages had set up his cart next to the building, where a small group of armored guard rats were gathered around a table, overlooking what was most likely a map while discussing something amongst themselves. The old mouse himself was standing next to his cart's wheel, arms folded as he impatiently awaited Justin's return. Isabella was there as well; she had been the one who had called them, and she was waving her arm high to get their attention, a bright smile on her face. Her maidservant was nowhere to be seen; no doubt tending to her duties in the marketplace.

Justin set the items he was carrying in the back of Ages' cart before taking the box from Elizabeth's hands and placing it with the other. He then turned to face his soldiers. "Report. How's the expedition progressing?"

"No signs in the south or west." One of the guards answered, pointing to what Elizabeth could now confirm was a map. "We've set up lookouts in both locations and will continue to monitor the surrounding areas."

"Good. Have the teams search out the north and east as soon as they're ready." Justin told them, tapping the locations on the map with a finger.

Elizabeth quietly swallowed the small lump that had been forming in her throat. Should she say something? She did say she would trust Justin with the knowledge of Spyro's existence, but now she was having second thoughts about that claim. He would see reason, perhaps, but his numerous men would most likely not. And even then, what *could* she say? That she had taken in a *dragon* into her home? They would think her mad. She gave

a quick glance to Isabella, who quietly motioned her with her hand to stay calm, though a look of concern adorned her own face as well.

"Brisby?" Mr. Ages spoke up, making the doe jump in surprise. She turned to face the older mouse as he approached her. "What are you doing out here? Don't you have a sick furling to take care of back home?"

"M-My aunt is taking care of Timmy and the others." Elizabeth explained, struggling to keep herself from looking suspicious.

Mr. Ages raised an eyebrow. "The shrew? All by herself?" He asked, continuing to push the subject. "Are you sure that's wise?"

Elizabeth lowered her gaze; she truly hated lying, but she couldn't tell them she left her children under the care of a fairy of all creatures. That would make her look even more mad than if she told them about Spyro. "I didn't have much of a choice: I needed to come for Moving Day, but Timmy was too sick to travel." She told him. "I have faith that Auntie Shrew will be able to look after them."

That seemed to satisfy the old mouse, and he nodded in agreement. "All fair, I suppose." He stated thoughtfully. "I trust the medicine I gave you is working well?"

"Oh, yes. Very well." She confirmed, nodding while clasping her hands together. "Thank you again." She then glanced at the cart, which was now empty of the large flat rocks that she had seen him leave with. "What happened to those rocks you had when you left?"

"Rocks?" Mr. Ages asked, looking confused, before he blinked in realization. "Oh, you mean the casts! Those were plaster casts I made; of the footprints I found near my ruins." He explained. "I took them before the Rosebush Council to show them what I found. That's how we were able to begin this expedition in the first place."

Well, at least that question had been answered. "I see…"

"*Another* Titan Beast…as if Dragon and the Great Owl weren't enough already…" Justin muttered aloud, running a hand through the fur on his head.

"Where did it even come from?" One of his soldiers asked, starting a wave of murmurs to pass through the crowd.

"Bet the Fairies had something to do with it." Said another.

"Will the villages between Rosebush and Feywild be safe?"

"What if this thing decides to rampage through the empire?"

"Does it eat rodentkin flesh?"

"Why did it appear now of all days?"

"Will it affect Moving Day? Will we have to face it and The Plow at the same time?"

"What are we going to do?"

These questions and more filled the air around the tavern's front yard, settling over them all like a fog of distrust and concerns. Elizabeth visibly sank under it, as if the weight of all the fear and uncertainty was physically pushing down on her. She wanted to say something; she had the answers to those questions and could ease the minds of everyone here…but only if they believed her, which she knew they wouldn't.

She wondered if Johnathan ever had moments like this: if the great hero of Nimh ever had the means to help someone but couldn't for reasons.

"Everyone! Please calm down!"

She perked up at the command, as did everyone else. It had been Isabella who had spoken; the young princess stepped forward and placed a comforting hand on Elizabeth's shoulder, turning to address the soldiers while clearing her throat.

"Let us not lose heart of this venture. Do not forget: you are the sword and the shield of the empire." Isabella continued, keeping an air of royalty about her as she spoke. "Remember that when you step into the frontlines, be it facing down a Titan Beast or enemies of war, you do so with the lives of your mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, and children counting on you. We march on not just for our own lives, but theirs as well, knowing we are what stands between them and what danger threatens them, so hold them close, and they will be your strength."

Elizabeth watched in a mix of surprise and admiration as she watched Isabella speak to the squad…to her people. She could outright see the effect her words had on them; their postures relaxed from the fear and uncertainty, and they took on stances of courage, shoulders straightening and chests puffing out bravely. It was if they had transformed from wary furlings to brave-hearted bucks.

As was to be expected from Princess Isabella. Even from a young age, the princess had always possessed a strength to her words; she always knew what to say to help those in need, be it words of kindness or words of wisdom. It was as if she had a power to move the hearts of those she spoke to.

She would make a great queen one day, once Nicodemus either passed away or retired…

…if her cousin didn't take the throne first.

"Well said, Princess." Justin said, giving her a respectful nod of the head. "We're indebted to you for your words."

When he spoke to her, though, Isabella immediately lit up like a hearth's fire: her face became a rosy red in color, visible even through her fur, and she bashfully looked to the side, playing with one of the locks of her hair. "I-It was nothing! R-Really!" She stammered, unable to keep the smile off her face. "J-Just doing my duty! Heh heh…"

Elizabeth couldn't help but smile herself. Isabella's feelings for Justin were as obvious as the light of Frith himself; even as a furling, she had a strong

attraction towards him, even before he became captain of the guard. Elizabeth remembered when she first met Isabella, and how the young pre-teen declared her intent to marry Justin one day (probably because she might've seen her as a potential rival for Justin). And as they grew, what had started as a youngster's attraction had blossomed into something truly wonderful.

If only she had the courage to confess her love to the captain. Probably made her feel a bit hypocritical, preaching about their courage while having none herself. Perhaps she could-

Her musing was interrupted by the distant screams of terror, making everyone look up in surprise. Justin and the rest of the guards were on alert immediately, readying their hands to draw their swords, while the rest of the town square all stopped what they were doing and turned in the direction of the screaming.

Then, from behind the distant trees to the north, they came tumbling forth: a group of furlings of mostly mice and squirrels, age ranging from younglings to teenagers, some of which were natives to Dapplewood and some that had come for Moving Day. All of them were in a state of full-blown panic, eyes wide as dinner-plates, filled with the fear that could only be found in those that had seen the eyes of death. They came scrambling into the open square, tripping and climbing over each other in a mad attempt to put as much distance between them and what had scared them. Their cries attracted the attention of the rodentkin wandering the marketplace, and a crowd began to form.

"M-M-Monster!" One of them, a boy squirrel rodentkin with orange fur wearing a blue vest yelled. "T-T-There's a monster in the woods!"

"Giant! Horns! Teeth!" Another one of the furlings cried, clutching her head in fear. "S-S-So many *teeth*!"

Then another yelled the clencher: "It was *purple*! Covered in purple scales!"

A ball of ice formed in Elizabeth's stomach, and it took all she had not to speak up in defense of Spyro. She spared Isabella a glance, only to be met

with a worried expression on her own face. It looked like the secret was out.

Mr. Ages looked skeptical. "*Purple* scales?" He asked in disbelief. "Sounds a bit fantastical to me."

"Magical creatures do come in all sorts of colors." Justin said, running his clawed fingers through the fur on his chin in thought. He turned to the squirrel, who was still visibly shaking with fear. "Where did you all see this beast?"

"A-Acorn Glade!" The squirrel stammered, pointing frantically in the direction they had come from. "I-It came out of the bushes!"

"Abagail?" A new voice spoke up; Elizabeth turned to see another mouse rodentkin frantically pushing his way through the crowd; a buck with muddy-brown fur and a head of dark-brown fur, wearing a yellow shirt with black pants. His fearful eyes searched the group of furlings for the one he had called, but no voice answered. "W-Where's Abagail?!"

"R-Russel's missing to!" Another one, a female hedgehog with brown quills and a pine-green dress and bonnet, cried out in horror.

"Where's my Edgar?!" Janet, whom Elizabeth recognized from the night before, was in tears at this point. "*Where's my baby?!*"

"The monster must've gotten them!" One of the furlings, a female squirrel, exclaimed. "Frith above, it *ate* Abagail!"

Now Elizabeth didn't believe that for one second. Even though she had only known him for little over a week, she knew the dragon had a good heart behind all those sharp teeth; she knew he would never harm an innocent child, must less eat one. She remembered what Zoe had said about Dragon Law: 'Only the Wicked or the Guilty may be devoured in the name of Vengeance'.

But given the way the crowd was starting to grow restless, she doubted anyone would believe it: frightened murmurs were steadily growing into full voices, passing through the crowd like the shadow of a dark cloud.

"Everyone calm down!"

Justin's shout broke through the noise like a finger snap in a silent room. All eyes turned to the captain of the guard, who jumped up on top of Mr. Ages' cart to make sure everyone could see him; he drew his sword, the steel gleaming in the sunlight and catching the attention of everyone watching him.

"My guards and I are going to form a search party to find the missing furlings! Everyone else, please return to your homes and barricade yourselves in them as fast as possible!" He commanded the crowd. "If there is a Titan Beast on the loose, we will find it and drive it away from Dapplewood! Now go! Hurry!"

That spurred everyone into action. The rodentkin gathered began to hurry home as fast as they would go; the vendors of the marketplace began closing their shops and gathering what goods they could before returning home, mothers gathered up their younger children or ushered their older ones to get to safety, and the soldiers at Justin's command began preparing themselves for the possibly of doing battle with a new Titan Beast; they made their way to the stables, where their War Rabbits were waiting for them, already adorned in armored saddles.

"As if being a Titan Beast alone was bad enough." Mr. Ages grumbled. "If it were to be magical on top of everything else, this could be disastrous."

Justin sheathed his sword and jumped off the cart. "Biff, I want you to take Isabella and Mr. Ages. Find somewhere safe to ride this out."

"No, I'm coming with you." Mr. Ages objected instantly.

Justin sighed in exasperation. "Look, it's too dangerous for an older mouse to-"

"Dangerous nothing!" The old rodent snapped, stepping up to the taller rat and puffing his own chest out. "I was sent here to record this new beast for the archives, and I intend not to have my time wasted! Now, you can either let me come with you or I'll set out myself! Your pick!"

One could almost see the frustration rising off of Justin, but in the end, he sighed and motioned Mr. Ages to follow him. He then gave a flat look to Isabella, who looked like she wanted to say something. "*You're* not coming with us and nothing you say will change that. Nicodemus would have my head if something happened to you."

"I-I wasn't going to say that." Isabella said defensively, even as her crush mounted his own war-rabbit, which another guard had brought to him by the reins. "I just…be careful out there, okay?"

Justin nodded. "I'll come back to you soon, M'lady." He said as he waited for Ages to mount the saddle behind him. Then, with a flick of a reins and a loud 'H-yah!', the squad set out in the direction of Acorn Glade, their rabbits tearing their way across the dirt and through the undergrowth of the forest. They disappeared from view in no time.

Isabella waited until they were gone before she turned to Elizabeth. "What do we do?" She asked a bit frantically. "We can't just let them find Spyro!"

"I know, I know!" The mouse said in a hushed tone, motioning with her hands for her to do the same. "Look, I need to go find Spyro and get him to hide somewhere, before any of the guards find him."

"Do you think you can get to him before they do?" Isabella asked, looking uncertain.

"I can only hope we do, otherwise someone might get hurt." Elizabeth told her as she began to head in the same direction.

"Wait!" The princess called out to her, prompting her to stop. "Let me come with you." Elizabeth opened her mouth to object, but Isabella beat her to it. "Look, I have something I need to show Justin: if they do find Spyro, we'll need a way to prove he's on our side, and I have just the thing."

"…Are you sure it will work?" The mouse asked.

"It will, without doubt." Isabella said with a firm nod. "It's in my room in the tavern. I'll go get it and then we can go."

Elizabeth looked conflicted, but ultimately gave in. "Alright, but hurry!" She told her friend. Isabella nodded again before she made her way to the tavern's door, knocking on it to alert the hiding Janet that she was coming in. Meanwhile, the mouse could only look out into the deeper forest, hoping that Spyro would be okay.

She could only pray to Frith that things wouldn't end badly.

The soft crunching of acorns was one of only two sounds to be found in the glade, the second being the deep breaths of a massive dragon, crackling like open flame within his lungs.

The four furlings that had been left behind were now sitting on the ground near the tree, gathered around a small pile of acorns, and were quietly nibbling on them, watching as Spyro simply laid there and told his story of how he was a native to Nimh.

"…then Mrs. Brisby and I traveled with Isabella until we made it to Dapplewood." Spyro finished, the end of his tail softly thumping on the ground in a cat-like manner. He had told them a brief version of events rather than getting into the full details; he figured that would be best for a group of children to have a simple version of the story, especially when said details were pretty…*messy*, to say the least.

He also had deliberately left out his trip to the Dragon Realms, as he decided that it was a tale they, in their innocence, did not need to be burdened with.

And it seemed to do the trick; all four of them seemed much more at ease than they had been when they had been at the beginning. They still wilted a little under his draconian gaze, but that was to be expected; even when holding his essence back, his very presence alone was still enough to frighten mortals, after all.

"This whole time…" The mole boy, whom Spyro learned was named Edgar, muttered aloud. "…A *Dragon*. In Nimh. *This whole time*."

"Yeah…*crazy*." The hedgehog, who was named Russel, agreed, taking a large bite out of his acorn afterwards.

Spyro stared at the acorn intently for a moment before turning his gaze towards the pile of them that the four furlings were sitting around. ***"Why do you fight over these acorns?"***

The four shared confused looks with each other before looking up at the dragon. "We're not fighting over them." Abagail told him.

"I mean why were you and the other furlings fighting over them in the tree, before I showed myself." Spyro explained, shifting his wings against his sides as he leaned a bit on his right forearm. ***"Surely there are better sources of food to be found in this forest. Why go through so much trouble for these?"***

"Because they're the best acorns in all of Nimh!" Russel said happily with a mouth full of chewed up acorn.

"Don't talk with your mouth full." Edgar said pointedly; the young mole had yet to touch one, instead opting to eat from a pile of dead beetles and wriggling worms he was carrying in his arms. "But yeah; this tree makes some of the tastiest nuts in the entire continent."

"Is that so?" Spyro rumbled with interest, and he reached his right paw out to pick one of the acorns up. The furlings all instinctively hunched down as the large hand-paw, which was easily big enough to squash them all at once, hovered over their heads as he plucked a single acorn between his claws. He then lifted it up to his eye level; he examined the nut with a curious stare, expecting it for anything out of the ordinary, before opening his large jaws and tossing it into his maw.

He chewed for a moment before his eyes widened in surprise…and instantly squeezed shut in disgust; he turned his head to the side and gave a guttural spat, practically firing the pulped remains of the acorn from his jaws. The saliva that flew from his mouth landed on the ground with a fierce hiss of steam, the very dirt bubbling as it dissolved in the acidic fluid.

"I still can't understand how you herbivores can stand to eat this filth." He growled in disgust, wiping his jaws with the back of his wrist.

"You and me both." Edgar said in agreement, popping one of the beetles he had into his own mouth. Russel merely stuck his tongue out at his friend, taking another bite of his acorn.

"Yeah, they're good, but they're getting less and less every year." The mouse boy, who was named Willy (a nickname for William, Spyro assumed), said after swallowing his own mouthful. "This tree's getting too old; it can only make so much every year. So we all end up fighting over what we can get when it does make some."

"Seems rather petty to me." Spyro stated flatly. ***"Especially when getting to the point of debasing other races."***

"Huh?" Willy looked confused at the dragon's wording but blinked in realization soon enough. "Oh, you mean Waggs. Don't pay attention to him: he just likes to pick fights." He gave a humph. "He's always like that, even back home."

Spyro cocked his head to the side. ***"Back home?"***

"Oh, I'm not from Dapplewood, and neither are Waggs and his friends." Willy explained. "We're all here for Moving Day."

Moving Day. The very same reason he and Elizabeth had ventured to this village in the first place. ***"And what exactly is Moving Day? I've only heard the name in passing."***

That question brought a moment of silence to the glade; the four furlings had varying look between them, ranging from sad to angry to fearful. In the end, it was Abagail who finally answered his question, her voice hollow and quiet:

"Moving Day is when The Plow comes."

Spyro blinked. ***"And what is 'The Plow'?"***

"It's a *monster*." Willy spoke this time, and his voice was one of bitterness and hate. The kind that would only come from personal experience. "A giant metal beast. Dad said it was made by man long ago; to steal the magic from our lands." His paws tightened into fists, his face contorting from the memories passing through his mind…bad memories, from the looks of it. "It doesn't eat, it doesn't sleep, it doesn't even breathe. It just goes across the land, crushing everything in its path and draining everything else."

"It travels on a path that loops all across Nimh." Abagail continued to explain, placing a comforting hand on her friend's shoulder. "And that path takes it near several villages and cities. Everyone has to evacuate to keep from being drained." She looked out into the nearby forest, just taking a moment to appreciate the serenity. "Everyone from Oakdale had to evacuate to Dapplewood this time of year."

"While our homes will be flattened and our food drained by The Plow…" Willy grumbled angrily.

Spyro didn't say anything as he watched the furlings, observing their emotions and mentally studying everything he could about this new information.

A metal beast that doesn't eat or sleep…a *machine*, then. Spyro was familiar with machines: lifeless constructions of metal and electricity that could move and fight, as he had seen in the Beastmaker's Lands during the Gnorc Invasion. The metal giant Metalhead was one such example…and a painful one at that; just thinking about the behemoth made the burn scars on his feet ache. But this one didn't sound like it was made for fighting: it 'drained' the land of magic, they had said…a mana collector, maybe? Those were rare, as magic and technology were opposing elements, but it was possible, given it was made by man.

Man.

The Corrupters of Creation.

Spyro had never met a human being before in his entire life, only knowing about them in old tales told by the older Fae. And nothing about those tales

spun anything good about them; a machine designed to steal the very magic from the world itself certainly sounded like something they would make…

"I don't understand." The dragon muttered aloud, the end of his tail swishing in thought. ***"Why haven't I heard of this Plow before? Feywild is full of magic; why doesn't it come there?"***

Abagail shrugged. "I guess it can't smell the magic from that far away. It never comes close to Dapplewood."

As good a guess as anyone else could think, he assumed.

That's when he heard them, and he perked up, looking towards the direction the other furlings had fled in. He could hear the thumping footsteps of something larger than rodentkin approaching, and a large number of them at that. It sounded almost like the thumping of…rabbits?

War Rabbits, he realized with worried eyes. The residents of Dapplewood must've heard about him from Waggs and the others and now had sent a party of hunters out to find him!

He had to leave. *Now*.

Without a word of explanation, he quickly got up onto all fours; he barely registered Abagail asking what was wrong as he turned in the opposite direction of the approaching party and ran, bounding away into the forest in a manner akin to a giant cat. The four children could only watch as he quickly disappeared into the underbrush with a flurry of leaves and dirt, his heavy footsteps fading into the distance…and no sooner had he completely vanished did the squad from Rosebush City arrive on their War Rabbits, weapons drawn and ready for battle. They came tearing out of the bushes with loud war cries, ready to slay the evil monster that had gobbled up the helpless furlings…

…only for their cries to fade into exclamations of confusion when they arrived to find the glade empty of any giant purple monsters.

As confused as he was, Justin was beyond relieved to see the four missing furlings. He and Mr. Ages, along with a few other guards, quickly dismounted their rabbits and ran to the children's side, ready to assist them in any way.

"There you are! Are you hurt?" He asked, offering a hand to help who he assumed to be Abagail.

Abagail looked torn, glancing in another direction for some reason, but did take his hand, allowing the rat to help her to her feet. "We're fine." She told him. "He didn't hurt us."

Justin blinked. "What? Who didn't hurt you?" He asked.

"Justin! Over here!" Mr. Ages suddenly called from further into the glade, motioning him to come over with surprising vigor for a mouse his age. Justin left the four recovered furlings to the other guards as he jogged over to where Ages was standing, near the old oak tree…and when he saw what the old mouse was frantically pointing at, his own eyes went wide with shock:

Footprints. Large and deep.

The very same ones that Mr. Ages had made plaster casts of.

Chapter 20: The Secret Revealed

Chapter Text

Spyro didn’t stop running until he was a good distance away from Dapplewood itself.

It was only when he was certain that no one was following him did he slowly come to a stop, his bounding gallop slowing until he was simply walking again. And after another moment of surveying the forest around him, that in itself ended, and the dragon came to a complete halt. For a moment he just stood there, observing the area he was in; another small part of the forest full of trees and bushes, the canopy completely concealing the sky above, casting beams of light through the air. The only sound he could hear was his own breath; he was breathing so hard that smoke was expelling from his jaws, and he waited until he had completely caught his breath before he relaxed…as much as his nerves allowed him to.

That was close. *Way too* close. He had almost been discovered by the rats. That would’ve ended badly.

He gave a guttural sigh and continued through the trees at a slow thinking pace, his footfalls quiet and gentle. Perhaps it had been a mistake to stay behind when the furlings had arrived; he should’ve left before they did, rather than stay behind. His curiosity had gotten the better of him, and his good-natured drive to help others had led him to reveal himself to them.

That part was, perhaps, for the best: if he hadn’t been there, Abigail and Willy would’ve gotten hurt by the fall they took.

He gave a gurgling croon at the thought; guess Fate forced him into revealing himself in the end.

He never did care for Fate.

He slipped around one of the trees in his path, his body and long tail following after his head like a serpent slithering through the air. His feet, as

quiet as they were, still left large footprints behind him, the claws cutting deep into the earth; one paw landed on the root of the tree in question, the bark cracking a bit under his weight. There was a rustling sound coming from above, and he looked upwards to the branches above him to see a few birds perched among them. They were all huddled together, looking down at the dragon with wide, frightened eyes, their beaks clamped shut with fear.

He simply stared at them for a moment before turning away and continuing on. The silence his presence evoked wherever he went was second-nature to him now; the birds and even the insects stopped singing whenever he passed by, and he was only able to hear them in the distance.

It made sense: being the greatest of all the legendary beasts in Creation guaranteed he would evoke fear in all mortal life; even those he had grown close to had been afraid of him at one point in their lives, just like Mrs. Brisby had been. Only a very, *very* few had been able to look upon his form and show no fear, King Oberon and Zoe being among them. But even they had the luxury of being introduced to him while he was still young and small, not nearly as intimidating as he was now.

It was both a blessing and a curse, honestly.

On the one hand, he enjoyed the feeling of power that came with bearing feared: to see his enemies cowering before his incredible might, and his allies bowing in respect of his great strength. To an Elder Dragon, being feared was a birthright, one that they took great pride and pleasure alike in.

But on the other hand, it meant that the times where he *didn't* want to scare people were…*difficult* to deal with. It wasn't easy to be this terrifying and to make friends at the same time. The lesser Dragons of the Dragon Realms were proof of that; all his attempts to find a place among them, only to be turned away by tooth and flame…and he recalled the way Mrs. Brisby looked at him when they first met.

He shook his head in an animalistic manner in an attempt to rid his mind of those troublesome thoughts. The less he dwelled on them, the better.

Right now, he had other things to focus his mind on. New things about this brand new world that were starting to trouble him:

The Plow.

His eyes narrowed at the thought of it: of an ancient machine that devoured the magic from the land and forced the rodentkin to live in constant fear of losing their homes to it. A threat to his new way of life for sure; the image of it coming to the Lee of the Stone was one that made him angry.

But would that ever even happen? Abigail said it never came up to Dapplewood, and to Feywild by extension. Would explain why he never heard of it before today…did Oberon and the other fairies know about it? Perhaps they did but believe it not to be an issue; after all, it never bothered them: it only remained in the rodentkin lands, thus was never a bother for the Fae. Why bother getting worked up over something that didn't involve you at all?

A very Fae way of thinking.

It was wisdom, yes, but Spyro couldn't help but feel differently about it: yes, it didn't bother the fairies, but the rodentkin of the southern lands would feel differently. After all, if the situation was switched, and it was the Fae who were threatened by a yearly danger, would they be singing the same tune? The rodentkin had homes and lives of their own, just like fairies did, even if they were different ones. Didn't they have a right to live? Weren't they Soul Bearers as well?

If the fairies begged for help from a threat, they would want someone to answer their pleas, wouldn't they?

He was so caught up in his thought that he paid little attention to his surroundings. If he had, he would've smelled them coming.

The young Safi'jiiva pushed his way through a small gap in the trees, deciding he had gone far enough to stop and rest, when he found himself stepping out of the woods onto a path in the forest. This path wasn't the same he had taken with Isabella's carriage, far more secluded than the main

path, overgrown with vegetation. And to his right, coming down from the north, was a group of rats. There were about fifteen in total, all of them riding on saddled rabbits, like the guards in Dapplewood had, and also had the same armor and crest of Rosebush City.

However, the rat leading them was no captain of the guard: his fur was dark grey with a black countershade on his head, lining his face like a dark hood. His face was a wicked-looking one, with sharp teeth, long eyebrows, and a small goatee, while his eyes were a sinister green in color and filled with cruel malice. He was dressed in a dark-red shirt with purple sleeves, complete with a long black cape with a light-red interior and a golden diamond-shaped brooch. And from his hip hung an outright ghastly-looking sword with a serpentine-shaped blade.

The rat's eyes widened in alarm at the sight of the dragon stepping out onto the path in front of him and his men; said men all gasped in fear as they recoiled, their rabbits fearfully shuffling backwards as they struggled to keep from falling off.

However, the lead rat's alarm quickly turned into a fierce anger, and he bared his teeth in a dangerous-looking snarl, pulling his sword from its scabbard with a metallic shing. Spyro instantly took a defensive stance, turning his body to face him head on, stepping out onto the path in full and baring his own teeth in warning, a deep growl rumbling from his throat.

"SURROUND IT! ATTACK FROM ALL SIDES!" The rat shouted to his men, pointing his sword forward. His command snapped them out of their terrified stupor and they fell in line: with a quick strike of the reins, their rabbits leapt forward and surrounded the 'beast'. Spyro stopped growling and narrowed his eyes, which darted back and forth with slit pupils as he stood his ground, even as they formed a circle around him. Soon, he was trapped in a circle of rabbits and rats. From their saddles, the soldiers retrieved large crossbows and loaded them with arrows, aiming them at their target as their metal heads gleamed in the dark.

Spyro paused as he saw the arrowheads, and he took a quick sniff of the air. He recognized this smell.

Common Steel.

Child's play.

"FIRE!"

The soldiers fired their crossbows in unison, sending the arrows flying through the air, to which Spyro merely held out a wing to shield his face; not that he believed they would do any real damage, but rather so he didn't have to bother with them poking at his eyes. The arrows glanced off his scaly hide and his leathery membrane as if both were iron-plated, leaving not so much as a scratch behind as they fell to the ground in a clatter. That was to be expected: Even at a young age, a dragon's hide is strong enough to withstand blows from all weapons made of common metals. Iron, Steel, Aluminum, and even Titanium; all of them were too weak to pierce his natural armor, no matter what kind of weapon they were made into. There were only two, maybe three, metals in all the world that were strong enough to pierce through dragonscale, and none of these rats had-

The leader of the rats charged forward on his lupine steed and drove his sword forward, with the intent on plunging it through the dragon's heart.

Spyro caught a whiff of the sword's scent, and he quickly jumped to the side just in the nick of time: the blade slashed through the scales on the side of his right arm like a knife cutting through butter. It cut deep enough to draw blood but didn't pierce very far into the muscle.

The pain was still very real, though.

He gave a shrieking roar and instinctively swung his now-injured arm at the rat, back-handing him across the torso; not hard enough to break any bones, but more than enough to knock him clear off his startled war rabbit and send him tumbling across the ground, his now-bloodied sword clattering against the hardened earth. It landed in a patch of sunlight, which revealed its distinct dark-grey blade with wavy patterns.

There was no denying that color. It was forged from Damascus Steel, the only mortal-made metal capable of cutting through dragonscale.

With a pained cough, the leader of the rats rolled over onto his chest and pushed himself up onto his hands and knees. Another cough escaped his mouth, along with a mouthful of blood that splattered on the ground; it looked like Spyro had hit him harder than he intended to. The dragon took a step back, limping on his wounded limb, but didn't get very far until he felt something poke at his tail. He looked back to see that the other rats that were behind him had drawn their own swords and were trying to stab or slice at him. However, their swords were only steel and thus didn't do anything; it seemed only the leader had a Damascus sword, thank Akatosh.

His first instinct was to fight back. To strike them down and make them suffer for bringing yet more pain to his already-scarred body…but in the end, he thought of Mrs. Brisby, and what she would think if he were to do that to rats who were only trying to stop what they believed to be a threat.

He looked around at the soldiers surrounding him and spotted his chance to escape: one of the rats, a chubbier one with dark grey fur wearing a pale-brown sleeveless shirt and metal gauntlets, was shaking with fear on top his rabbit, his sword wobbling in his grasp. The moment it presented itself, Spyro rushed at him with a fierce snarl, unleashing a touch of his essence for good measure. It worked perfectly: the rat gave a cry of terror as he fell backwards off his mount, his sword being flung away through the air. His war rabbit was also spooked by the intimidation tactic and bolted, almost trampling its rider in the process.

The dragon took the chance and leapt forward, jumping clear through the open air and escaping through the gap in the formation. The rats all watched with expressions of awe and fear as the massive, fox-sized beast flew through the air and landed on the ground with a heavy crash, shaking the earth from the impact. It then ran as fast as any rabbit back into the forest from whence it came.

"DON'T LET IT GET AWAY!" Spyro heard their leader shout as he fled through the trees, kicking up a cloud of dust and fallen leaves behind him as he did. His injured leg flared in pain with each step, but he forced himself to run through it, as he could already hear their rabbits running to catch up to him.

In his rush to lose his pursuers, he failed to realize he was running in the exact same direction that he had come from.

Relief is always a welcome feeling.

And relief was exactly what Elizabeth felt as she surveyed the scene in front of her: the scene within Acorn Glade. She and Isabella were currently hiding in the bushes to the north of it, watching as Justin's soldiers patrolled the area. The four furlings that had been declared 'eaten' were safe and sound, being fussed over by a few of Justin's men; this was the most relieving, as it meant Spyro hadn't harmed them as the others had claimed…not as she believed it for a moment, but it was always good to see it for herself.

The sight of Justin and Mr. Ages examining Spyro's footprints, on the other hand, was worrying. The old mouse was taking measurements with a piece of string, stretching it across the various lengths of the imprint, before writing down his findings in a leather-bound notebook he had brought along. Justin, meanwhile, was observing the nearby forest line for any trace of the creature that had made them, his hand gripping the handle of his blade.

"He's not here." Isabella said as she ran a hand across her forehead, her own voice heavy with relief. "Oh, Thank Frith."

Elizabeth looked back at her, or more precisely at the item she was carrying in her other hand. It was long and wrapped in a thick cloth from end to end, one end being wider than the other. Clearly a bladed weapon of some sort, though she wasn't sure what kind or where she had gotten it from.

"They'll go looking for him, though." She told the princess, turning back to watch the group in the glade. "It's only a matter of time before they find him…oh, Frith, we shouldn't have come."

She felt a comforting hand rest on her shoulder. "Hey, hey, it's going to be okay." Isabella assured her. "We'll find Spyro and take him away from Dapplewood. And then we'll-"

They both felt it before they heard it: a soft thudding vibrating through the ground between their feet. It was very quiet at first, distant and fleeting, but it quickly grew to be more evident, the impacts growing larger and heavier with each passing second. It was evident from their reactions that the group in the glade were feeling it as well, all of the soldiers looking about in confusion. Soon, the impacts were so powerful that they were making the weaker among them stagger in place, their tails sticking out in a desperate attempt to keep their balance.

Elizabeth recognized the impacts…that is to say, she recognized the pattern they were coming in:

The quadruple footfalls of a four-legged creature running at full gallop.

It appeared that relief was just as fleeting as it was welcome.

There was an explosion of wind and leaves as Spyro came bursting out of the underbrush in a giant leap, soaring through the air like a giant panther leaping for its prey. All eyes in the glade were upon him in an instant, watching with wide, unbelieving expressions as the purple dragon all but flew overhead, his massive form casting a humongous shadow over them. Many rats cried out in horror and scampered out of the way as he landed in the center of the glade with the grace of a cat yet the force of an asteroid: the impact alone shook the remaining acorns from the old tree and sent many of the soldiers tumbling to the ground with a clatter of armor and weapons.

Mr. Ages barely registered the fact that he had fallen over as well, sitting on the ground while watching Spyro with an awestruck expression. "*Impossible*…" He murmured aloud.

"Ages, get behind me!" Justin barked as he grabbed the old mouse by the back of his shirt collar and pulled him backwards, away from the dragon, before drawing his sword in preparation for battle.

The dragon in question recoiled animalistically at the sight of all the new threats around him, caught off guard by their sudden appearance, eyes wide with surprise. When he saw them beginning to draw their swords, said eyes

narrowed as he took on a defensive stance, spreading his wings to make himself appear bigger than he already was.

It was then that another squad burst out of the same underbrush he had; more soldiers from Rosebush City, also on war rabbits, their swords already drawn for combat. They surrounded Spyro from behind, forming a half circle to prevent him from escaping back the way he came. And leading them was none other than an all-too familiar rat:

"*Jenner*?" Elizabeth heard Isabella say from behind her, with no shortage of *contempt* in her voice. "What is *he* doing here?"

Elizabeth didn't answer; instead, she watched in horror as a number of Justin's men began to follow suite to Jenner's and surround Spyro from the front, their weapons drawn and aimed at him, completely cutting him off from further escape. She wasn't worried that Spyro would be harmed: the fact the bandits' weapons had been ineffective against him was proof he would not be harmed. No, what worried her was the sight of the dragon baring his teeth in self-defense; teeth that would easily punch straight through even the strongest of Rosebush's armor.

Then, as if that wasn't enough, Spyro's chest began to glow through the grooves of his scales with a familiar fiery-orange light.

Her heart nearly seized in her chest at the sight of it; he was preparing to blow his fire breath on them!

She had to stop this!

"*WAAAAAIT!!*"

Her voice outright *shot* through the clearing with the punch of a cannon firing, surprising even herself with its potency; her throat hurt from the shout, as she rarely ever shouted, let alone at that volume. Everyone, Justin, Jenner, Ages, Spyro, the furlings, and all the guards, looked up in surprise as she all but jumped out of her hiding place. Her appearance did the trick, as the glow in Spyro's body began to die down when he saw her, though it didn't disappear completely.

Elizabeth, despite herself, ignored all the eyes on her and ran to the dragon as fast as her four paws would take her. Many of the guards in her way tried to grab her as she passed or guided their rabbits to block her path, but she nimbly dodged each of them with ease, darting through the crowd like a common mouse dodging the paws of a cat; her Feral-Born origins did have some benefits, such as faster reflexes. She didn't stop until she jumped between Justin and Spyro, turning to face the former before she spread her arms wide, putting herself between her dragon and the swords that were aimed at him.

"Biff, *what* are you *doing*?!" Justin exclaimed in alarm. "Get away from that thing!"

Elizabeth shook her head. "I'm not going to let you hurt him!"

"*Justin!*" Jenner's cruel voice barked from the other side of the circle. "Get that doe under control! We can't let this *beast* get to Dapplewood!"

"No!" Elizabeth cried. "He's not going to hurt anyone! He *doesn't want* to hurt anyone!"

"She's mad!" Jenner commented harshly.

"*Please,* Justin! Trust me!" The doe pleaded, clasping her hands together. "He's not a threat!"

Justin looked torn. "How can you be sure?" He asked, still on guard.

Elizabeth swallowed before speaking: "Because he's my friend!"

That got everyone's attention, and a collective murmur spread throughout the crowd. Some called her mad, as Jenner had, while others looked just as conflicted as their captain did. Justin and Mr. Ages shared a glance before looking at Spyro with uncertain expressions; Mr. Ages was outright enraptured by the beast before them, his own expression being one that someone might find on a scientist who just discovered the biggest scientific find of the century, whereas Justin's was one of great confusion as well as

trepidation, no doubt aware of the threat Spyro could be towards all of Rodentkin kind even if he was her friend.

“She’s telling the truth!” Abigail suddenly spoke up, rising to her feet; one of the guards next to her put an arm out to keep her back, she that did stop her from speaking. “Spyro’s not a bad dragon! He saved me from falling out of the tree!”

“It’s true! We saw it ourselves!” Edgar chimed in, while Russel merely nodded in agreement.

“I’ve heard enough of this madness!” Jenner shouted, jumping off his war-rabbit. He raised his sword and took a step forward, ready to charge Spyro, only for Isabella to step in his path, glaring at him in heavy disapproval. There was a moment of shock from the male rat, who looked genuinely surprised to see her.

“*Isabella*?! How are-?!” He stopped himself, returning the glare. “Get out of my way!”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that, *cousin*.” Isabella said simply, keeping a dignified air about herself, despite her current displeasure. Jenner outright growled in response, his teeth bared in a hate-filled snarl, but she didn’t budge from the spot. She turned away from her cousin, turning her gaze to Justin. “Captain Justin! Is this any way to thank the one who *saved my life*?”

That just added more confusion and concern to Justin’s already-frazzled brain, and the captain of the guard looked like he was about to be sick from all of it.

Elizabeth saw that she wasn’t going to convince them through words alone. She had to try something else.

A soft yet rumbling growl thrummed from behind her, and she turned her head to see Spyro standing there; the dragon was on edge, clearly conflicted on what he should do. Part of him was telling him to fight, as evidenced by his still-bared teeth and glowing chest-grooves, but his worried eyes told her that he didn’t want to fight despite what his instincts were telling him to

do. It was only then that she noticed the still-fresh wound on his foreleg, from following the blood that was still running down it; it wasn't hard to guess who had inflicted it upon him, if Jenner's blade, still red with blood, was anything to judge by.

It took a *lot* to choke down the bubbling fury that rose in her throat at that revelation; getting angry would not help anyone. Instead, she turned around to face Spyro directly, prompting the dragon to look down at her in turn.

"Spyro…*show them*." She pleaded, lifting her hands towards him, as if to offer a hug. "Show them you're not a monster. Let them see the dragon I know: the dragon who saved me."

Spyro stared at her for a few seconds before raising his head to look about the crowd that surrounded him, in a moment that felt like an eternity for everyone involved; the entire glade had fallen silent, all watching and waiting with baited breath to see how the great beast would react to this small doe's offer of friendship. There was a still a lot of uncertainty in the dragon's mind; all those drawn swords, all those fearful faces, just one wrong move away from rushing him with the intent to kill (not that they could). Everything in his blood was outright *screaming* at him to fight. To not let his guard down. To punish these arrogant wretches for *daring* to even think they could stand against him. Everything that made him a dragon was blazing as fiercely as the fire in his gullet.

But when he looked back at her…when he heard the pleading in her voice…and saw the kindness in her eyes…something just *cooled* within him, and the urge to kill faded down like the dying embers of a hearth.

He lowered his head down so that the end of his snout met her hands, allowing her to touch it, giving a very soft guttural croon as he did so. She did so, cupping the dragon's nose in her hold and gently petting the scaly skin in front of her, closing her eyes and leaning in to press her forehead against the bridge of his snout. Spyro's own eyes closed at the contact; the feel of her soft, warm fur against his face soothed him greatly, enough to where the fire in his chest finally died down.

The dragon then shifted his body and, as calmly and quietly as he could, laid down on the ground while folding his legs against his sides in a ‘loaf’ position, looking to all the world like a large purple cat. He then lowered his head all the way, his jaw resting on the dirt, content to simply rest in the warmth of the embrace, appearing to be asleep.

Elizabeth didn’t let go until he had fallen completely still. When he had, she gave one last reassuring squeeze and stepped backwards, one hand still resting on his nose. She turned back to the crowd, who were now all staring at her in complete, dumbfounded silence, unable to believe what they had just witnessed.

“*Extraordinary*…” she heard Mr. Ages breathe aloud.

“Biff…” Justin began, struggling to find words. “…what is *going on*?”

Elizabeth lowered her gaze in shame. “I’m sorry I lied to you.” She told him, caressing the scaly nose of her dragon. “I was afraid what you would do to him if you knew.”

“Fears that were not entirely unfounded, it would seem…” Isabella chimed in, glaring at her cousin.

Jenner snarled in a manner more fitting for an angry dog than an intelligent being. “You *cannot* be buying this insanity!” He shouted, free hand twisting into an angry claw. “Nimh has been invaded by a *dragon*! A ***Dragon***! And this *insane doe* is treating it like a *lost pet*!”

“All the more amazing and potentially good for us!” Mr. Ages objected, stepping forward. “A *Dragon*! In Nimh! Do you even *comprehend* what this could mean?! The discoveries that could be made from this?!”

“All I see are a group of fools who can’t see the threat this monster poses to all our kind!” The dark-furred rat snapped, pointing his sword at the still Spyro. “We all know the stories, don’t we?! The great serpents of the north, with skin of armor and breath of flame, destroying all in their path?!” He glared at the dragon with hateful, lime-green eyes. “This thing is a danger that must be dealt with immediately!”

“I-It’s true!” One of Jenner’s men, Sullivan, if Elizabeth remembered correctly, spoke up with fear in his voice. “That m-monster attacked us in the woods! Struck Jenner right off his rabbit!”

“You attacked me first.” Spyro suddenly spoke, his telepathic voice booming through the glade, even though it was tired and soft.

Everyone but Elizabeth, Isabella, and the furlings jumped at the voice that suddenly spoke directly into the minds, throwing many of them off of their feet, exclamations of shock and even awe passing through the crowd.

“They *can* speak…” Mr. Ages muttered in wonder, adjusting his glasses on his snout to better look at the creature.

“Spyro isn’t like any of those stories!” Elizabeth snapped back as she made her way around Spyros’ right. “He’s *kind*, and *gentle*; in all the time I’ve known him, he hasn’t once tried to harm me or my children!” She reached the dragon’s shoulder, making her way to where his arm was bleeding. She had to hop up onto the dragon’s wrist to reach the wound, taking off her cloak and pushing it against the cut in an effort to stop the bloodflow. “He’s *saved my life*, Justin; mine and Isabella’s.”

“And I can prove it!” Isabella announced to the crowd as she stepped forward in front of Spyro, who opened his eyes to see what she was doing; she then lifted the wrapped item in her hands and began to unravel the cloth from it. From her position next to Spyro, Elizabeth watched as the princess unwrapped the item to reveal it to be a bladed weapon: a dagger of sorts, one of a distinct shape and dark-grey color…but what drew everyone’s attention was a certain symbol carved into the blade: three lines crossing each other to form the shape of an upside-down triangle. A collective gasp filled the glade, and the guards closest to Isabella immediately jumped backwards, as if the very blade itself was plagued.

“That’s a *Skaven* blade!” Justin exclaimed, recoiling from it instinctively.

“They *weren’t* Skaven!” Isabella suddenly explained, holding the weapon against her chest. “They were common *bandits*…bandits paid by someone

inside Rosebush's inner council to kidnap me!" Another wave of surprised whispers and exclamations passed through the crowd again.

That claim got Spyro's attention; Tayna had been certain that those bandits had been these 'Skaven' creatures.

"Are you *sure* about this, Isabella?" Justin then asked, suddenly very serious.

Isabella nodded. "I am…it was *Nathaniel*, Justin: he was part of it." She lowered her gaze in betrayal. "He drove the carriage to the ambush point and gave us to them in exchange for gold…and then they killed him, once they had me."

Justin's face hardened in a frown, but Elizabeth could easily see the pain in it regardless of his attempt to hide his emotion. This 'Nathaniel' must've been someone everyone truly trusted.

"But why would common bandits use Skaven blades?" Mr. Ages asked.

"Why else?" Justin asked coldly. "To frame the Skaven for the job and throw off any and all ideas for rescue."

Isabella nodded. "If everyone knew they were just common bandits, then grandfather would do everything he could to rescue me…but if everyone thought it was the *Skaven* who took me? *No one* would even *think* about even looking for me and would write me off for dead. My point is: I was attacked by someone in my own empire." The female rat concluded, turning to Spyro to give him a grateful expression. "And this dragon *saved me*."

Everyone was so focused on the princess's words that no one noticed the way Jenner's grip tightened around the hilt of his sword.

"*Enough of this! Have you all gone completely mad?!*" The dark-furred rat shouted, looking ready to fly into a mad rage of his own. "This *thing* is not some valiant hero from fairytales!! It's a *monster*!! A feral beast which only desires to taste our blood!!" He turned to Justin, pointing his sword at him this time. "Justin! You're the captain of the guard, are you not?! You have a

duty to fulfill to your people, so stop wasting our time and *fulfill it already*!! That is an *order*!!”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened with dread at that. Why was Jenner so insistent on seeing Spyro slain? Was the act of self-defense such a terrible crime that it warranted his death?! She knew Jenner was a cruel rat, but this was just beyond justification.

Justin stared at him for a moment before turning back to the dragon, sword still in hand; Spyro lifted his head off the ground and watched the captain with narrowed eyes, his lip curling just enough to show a bit of his teeth in warning. Elizabeth stepped down from Spyro’s arm and stepped forward, ready to step back in between them, but praying to Frith she wouldn’t have to; Jenner was Nicodemus’ nephew, so he did have the authority to command the lower ranks of the empire’s forces, but did that apply to the captain of the guard? Isabella, perhaps the only rat who outranked Jenner in this situation, stayed where she was, not moving from her spot next to the dragon, watching with narrowed eyes of her own.

“I suppose I do have a duty to fulfill.” Justin said as he stepped forward. Spyro tensed, ready to move at a moment’s notice…

…only to blink in surprise as the rat sheathed his sword and bowed to him. Not just bowed, but outright knelt down on one knee and held his arm over his chest, as if bowing before a king.

“On behalf of my land and king, we thank you for your service.” He told the dragon.

Both Elizabeth and Isabella released a breath they hadn’t realized they had been holding, smiling with relief.

There was a moment of silence before another guard from Justin’s squad took the same pose, sheathing his sword and kneeling on one knee. Then another did the same, then another, and soon the entire squad were on one knee before Spyro. The rats in Jenner’s squad, all who were still on rabbit-back, took a moment to follow suite, but eventually they too gave a respectful bow from where they sat, mimicking Justin’s act of holding their

arms over their chests. Even Sullivan, for all his cowardice, eventually bowed as well, if for no other reason than fear of defying the captain's wishes. Jenner, meanwhile, looked ready to start foaming at the mouth with blind rage.

"That's it?" Spyro asked uncertainly, almost timidly, shifting a bit where he lay. ***"No fighting? No hate? Everything's alright now?"***

"Why would we fight someone who's been nothing but good to us?" Justin asked as he raised his head and stood back up, his men all doing the same after him.

Spyro looked relieved…no, that was an outright understatement; the dragon practically sagged with the emotion, a heavy sigh of smoke coming out of his jaws. *Finally*…after all the fighting, all the pain, all the sorrow…he was finally free to rest. The Rodentkin were accepting him; they didn't see him as the giant monster. They weren't going to cast him out like the dragons had.

He could find his place among them.

"INCOMPETENT *FOOL*!!" Jenner bellowed with fury, spittle flying from his mouth, his voice so loud it made his trained war-rabbit flinch in fear underneath him. "FINE!! I'LL DEAL WITH THIS MYSE-!!"

"*THAT IS* ENOUGH, *JENNER!!*" Isabella screamed, gripping the Skaven dagger as if she was prepared to use it, which she very well could've been. "YOU WILL STAND DOWN *NOW*!!"

Green eyes flashed an outright *murderous* anger. "*HOW DARE Y-!!*"

"I *OUTRANK* YOU!!" The princess outright roared before he could finish his sentence, her own blue eyes full of their own fury; she screamed so loud that her voice cracked, but that didn't make her look any else commanding. "AS LONG AS I AM FIRST IN LINE TO THE THRONE, I AM THE HIGHEST IN COMMAND AND YOU *WILL* RESPECT THAT IF NOTHING ELSE!!"

The silence that followed was deafening.

And in that silence, Spyro took a moment to observe the two fuming rats and was quite taken aback by how similar they looked to each other. Not only did they have the same fur color, but it was all patterned in the same way. The black fur on Isabella's head framed around her face in the same manner Jenner's did, while the rest of her was the same dark-grey he was. They looked far more like twins than they did cousins. The only real difference was their eyes: hers were a soft sky-blue while his were a sinister lime-green.

Isabella took the moment to catch her breath, not at all used to screaming at such a high volume. She then lifted the dagger and pointed it at Jenner in warning. "And as first in line to the throne, I hereby declare Spyro an ally to the empire and is under the protection of King Nicodemus himself." She continued in a much quieter, but no less angry, tone. "You, *cousin*, will abandon this hunt and leave this dragon be, or I will consider it *treason against the crown*. Do I make myself clear?"

Jenner's fist around the reigns of his rabbit clenched so hard that they drew blood, his claws digging into the flesh of his palm, but ultimately he had no choice; as much as he hated it with every fiber of his being, he was indeed only second in line for the crown, and thus Isabella's word was law to him, despite the technicalities of her ascension to the throne.

So, with teeth gritted so hard that they might start cracking, he sheathed his sword. "*As crystal…*"

"*Dismissed*." Isabella hissed, pointing the dagger towards Dapplewood to motion him to leave. Jenner said nothing more, giving Spyro one last hateful glare before he whipped the reins of his rabbit, pulling them to guide the rabbit back towards the village. Sullivan and the rest of his squad did the same, and Spyro watched as the small army of rats on rabbits bounded away, kicking up a cloud of dirt in their wake as they disappeared into the forest.

Justin watched them go before turning to his own squad. "Take the furlings back to their homes and spread the word that Dapplewood is in the clear."

He commanded the guard nearest to him. “Also, make sure Jenner doesn’t start spreading rumors about Spyro here.”

The guard looked uncertain. “Are you sure, sir?” He asked, eyeing Spyro with concern.

“Certainly.” He assured his soldier, turning to look at Spyro himself. “I think we can handle everything here now.”

The guard nodded. “Yes, sir.” With that, Justin’s own guard began the trip back to Dapplewood themselves; those already on rabbit-back began the trip while those who has dismounted theirs hopped back up onto theirs. Four of them each scooped up one of the furlings (who had been watching the whole exchange with dread) and placed them on their rabbit’s saddles before mounting them themselves.

Abigail, for her part, gave one last grateful smile to Spyro before she and the others were taken home, the other team of soldiers following the first back to the village.

And soon, the clearing of Acorn Glade was empty, apart from Spyro, Elizabeth, Isabella, Mr. Ages, Justin, and Justin’s war-rabbit.

It was only then that everyone was allowed a breath of relief to escape from their mouths, everyone sagging as Spyro had. Isabella outright dropped the dagger and staggered backwards, rubbing her now sore-throat with one hand. “That was a lot.” She croaked quietly, her voice still sore. “I’ve never raised my voice like that to anyone before.”

“I say that was very impressive, your highness.” Justin complimented her with a smile, placing a hand on her shoulder to keep her steady. She blushed heavily from both the contact and the compliment, struggling to keep from grinning like a loon.

The male rat then turned to Elizabeth, his smile fading a little. “Well, now that the secret’s out of the bag, mind telling us what’s going on, Biff?”

Spyro cocked his head to the side at that. *Biff?* What was Biff?

There was even less of the Energy than there was last year.

It could tell; its many stomachs, both organic and mechanical, weren't as full as the last time it had reached the southern edge of the northern forest. Its metal teeth turned and churned the earth beneath it but found less of the life-giving Energy than had been here last time. One could tell this even without the ability to drink the energy from the land: the plants were withered and dying, the ground cracked and barren, with only dry, dead grass blanketing the path before it.

Enough time had passed that it had been a year since it had been here. The Energy should've replenished by now. The plants should've been growing again.

But it wasn't. And they weren't.

That made it *angry*.

It needed the Energy. *Wanted* it. ***Craved*** it. Its existence was determined by the energy's presence; the more it had, the more it lived. The less it had, the more it could feel itself begin to decay. Feel its parts, both organic and metallic, break down from the centuries it had made its single looping journey across the land of giants. It had made the same trip over and over again, and always found plenty of the Energy to sustain its existence, but if there was going to be less from now, then how was it going to sustain its existence?

And what if there was going to be even less next time and came? And even less after that?

What if there would be none one day? None of the Energy?

That made it *even angrier*.

It was about to express this anger when it detected something. Using parts of its being that hadn't been used in many years. Through the age and dust, they picked up something. Something far away, far from the main path.

There, beyond the trees that it stood next to, it could sense it. See it. *Smell* it.

The Energy! And a *lot* of it. More than it had *ever* sensed in one place before.

Enough to keep it existing for eons to come.

The entire thing shuddered as it stopped, perhaps stopping for the first time it had ever come into being. Metal groaned and flesh bubbled from the sudden halt, gears and pistons steaming as they release heat, while veins and growths continuously pumped the Energy through its many parts. Its sensors continued to scan the area it sensed the Energy coming from, determining the best path to take, based on distance and terrain. It was far away, at least several miles, but it was a journey that would be worth it in the end.

So, it started itself up again. Great wheels churned to grasp the earth with mighty treads. Fleshy tendrils felt about the area in front of its massive form. A massive organic eye, unblinking and unwavering, shone a powerful blue light in the direction of its target.

Then, for the first time ever, it *left the path*. The path that had been set for it by its very creators. Trees cracked and were shoved aside as it pushed its way into the forest, all the while the massive column of smoke rising from its back continued to chug to the rhythm of its pumps. The trees themselves began to wither as it drained them of whatever little of the Energy it could get from them, joining the other plants that had been on its previous path in a state of lifeless decay.

It cared not for them. Not for the plants. Not for the animals. Not for the very world itself.

All it cared about was the Energy.

And it would have its Energy, one way or another.

Chapter 21: Discussions with a Dragon

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Chapter Text

“…then we arrived at Dapplewood, and you know the rest.” Elizabeth followed this sentence with a heavy breath of air, finally having finished telling her tale. Her throat was completely dry at this point from having talked so much, and she coughed into her fist in an attempt to soothe it.

“Here.” Justin offered her the waterskin that he had gotten from his saddlebags. She nodded in appreciation as she took it, drinking its contents greedily.

They were all sitting as a group in the middle of the glade, around a small fire that Justin had made using small twigs gathered from around the trees; Spyro had been the one to set it aflame, though, using just a small puff of a breath rather than the tidal wave of fire he had used to kill the bandits.

After they had got it set up, they all had taken a seat around it, and Elizabeth explained everything: she told Justin and Mr. Ages her story: about the weasels that attacked her after she left Mr. Ages, about Spyro finding the medicine after she had lost it, and about the bandits that had attacked Isabella before Spyro destroyed them. Isabella gave info from her end every now and then, but apart from that it was only Elizabeth who spoke for the entire duration of the story.

And now, here they were, at the end of her tale.

Justin ran a hand through the fur on his head, no doubt trying to wrap it around the sheer amount of information he had received.

“All this time…he was right there, and none of us knew it.” He muttered, laughing a bit afterwards at the sheer absurdity of it all. He turned to Mr. Ages, who was busy scribbling on a scroll he had taken from his belt and had rolled open across the ground. “Did you know ‘bout it, Ages?”

“Of course not!” Mr. Ages snapped, not looking up from his work. “And I’m *infuriated* by it! To think that the discovery of the century was literally under my nose for *decades* and I never noticed!”

Elizabeth bit back the urge to giggle at the old mouse’s irritation and instead turned her gaze to the papers lying across the ground. During the entirety of her explanation, he had been writing down notes and drawing images of Spyro with an old-fashioned pencil; he had already sketched out the beginnings of a rather beautiful illustration of Spyro’s head and neck, with notes pointing out certain features, and was beginning work on the torso.

“In the four thousand years of Nimh’s history, no dragon has *ever* come to this continent.” Mr. Ages said aloud as he continued his work. “Many reasons as to why have been theorized, but nothing concrete has ever been proven…so, to find one here, let alone as an egg, is nothing short of an outright *miracle*.”

“Zoe was insistent that his egg was found in their borders, with no signs of any nest.” Elizabeth told him.

“Ah, yes. Your new *fairy* friend.” Mr. Ages stated, with a bit of annoyance in his voice. “Guess that means your aunt’s rant about fairies was true after all…” He gave her a questioning look, tapping the back of his pencil against his lip. “And your absolutely certain you’re not being tricked or hexed in any way?”

“I am.” Elizabeth said confidently, placing her hands in her lap. “I trust Zoe with all my faith…” Her eyes lit up as an idea came to mind. “If you want, we could call her and you can see for yourself.”

Justin looked perplexed. “*Call* her?” He asked.

Elizabeth simply nodded as she reached into her skirt pocket and pulled out the Speaking Crystal; when he saw it, Mr. Ages' eyes widened a bit. "Is that a Farsqueaker?" He asked.

Isabella shook her head. "No, that's Fae magic, not Skaven tech." She told him as Elizabeth tapped the surface of the crystal three times.

Just as before, the crystal began to pulse with a blinking blue light as the wind chimes filled the air; Elizabeth then held it out for the others to see. The rest of them gathered around her to see what was going on; Justin watched with the same sense as wonder that she had when she first used it, while Mr. Ages watched with a polite interest; living within Feywild's borders made him more accustomed to magic and its wonders. And just as before, a few seconds passed before the white orb of light formed from the pixie dust of the crystal, which in turn formed into an image of a familiar fairy's face. And from the look of the background, she was in the kitchen/living room of the Brisby home, sitting at the dining table.

"Hey, Brisby!" Zoe said, her eyes currently looking downwards as she worked with something. *"Just finished preparing Timmy's medicine, so you called at a good ti-"*

That's when she looked up from her work; her eyes went comically wide at the sight of Justin and Mr. Ages. A second of silence passed with her just staring before she gave an exasperated groan and promptly slammed her head on the table-top with enough force to rattle the dishes on it.

"Good heavens!" Auntie Shrew's voice exclaimed from somewhere out of the image. *"What is going on-?"* Her face appeared in the image as she approached the fairy, and her own eyes went wide. *"…oh dear."*

"Twenty-four hours: it hasn't even been twenty-four hours *since you left for Dapplewood!"* Zoe groaned, lifting her head to reveal a rather large red spot on her forehead. She gave Elizabeth an exhausted look. *"Alright, what's the damage? How many rodentkin know of Spyro's existence?"*

Elizabeth swallowed nervously. "O-Oh, not many!" She tried to play it off, making the worst poker face any of them had ever seen. "Y-You know…just

Justin's entire squad…and Jenner's entire squad as well…and a good number of furlings from both Dapplewood and Oakdale…"

"Geehhhhuurrrgggg…" Was all the fairy said as she buried her face in her hands, fingers clawing at her scalp.

"Wait a minute…I *recognize* you." Mr. Ages said thoughtfully as he looked at Zoe, stroking his beard with his free hand. "You're Autumnleaf's daughter, aren't you?"

Zoe looked up from her hands with a cross look on her face, as if hearing her own last name angered her, but that expression faded when she saw who had spoken. *"Ages. It's good to see you again."*

Elizabeth blinked. "You know each other?"

"From a long time ago." Zoe explained, sitting back in her chair. *"I got sick once, and Oberon summoned Ages to Avalon to tend to me. About thirty years ago, I think; back when Spyro was about my size."*

Mr. Ages made a cross face of his own. "Don't tell me your dragon was there when I was…"

Zoe, however, merely grinned. *"Would you believe me if I told you that Spyro was in my bedroom the day you came in*?" She asked. *"Hiding under my bed, to be exact."*

The old rodentkin's jaw practically hit the floor.

"You've *got* to be *joking*…" He groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose. Zoe gave a small laugh at his exasperation, her eyes twinkling with amusement.

"Who's that?" Teresa's voice asked from outside the image. She poked her head into the crystal's view and immediately lit up at the sight of everyone. *"It's Justin! And Mr. Ages!"*

"Really?" Martin was next, pushing his way into sight next to her. *"Hey, it* is *Justin!"*

Cynthia was the last to join the fray, poking her nose up from beneath her siblings. *"Hi, Captain Justin!"*

Zoe stiffened at that, one of her eyes twitching. "Captain *Justin?!"* She almost cried out in shock. *"Please tell me that's just a nickname, or that he's a pirate captain that just happens to be pretty far inland?"*

Justin grinned at that. "Nope, sorry. I should probably introduce myself." He said, giving a polite bow of his head. "I'm Justin, Captain of Rosebush City's Royal Guard and right-hand man of King Nicodemus. Nice to meet you."

Zoe promptly planted her face back into her hands and gave a muffled scream of frustration. Once she got that out of her system, she gave Elizabeth a deadpan look. *"I suppose this is my fault: counting on a mouse to hide a fox-sized dragon right next to a village wasn't the smartest move on my part."*

"It wasn't Mrs. Brisby's fault." Spyro told her, the end of his tail swishing around the ground. ***"I was the one who stepped in to catch the furlings, and the one who failed to avoid the patrols. This is on me."***

Zoe looked at Spyro from her place on the other side of the spell, and it was then she saw the wound on the dragon's arm; the wound itself had already healed, the flesh having knitted itself back together and the scales regrown, now just another scar having joined the dozens of others across his body. But the dried blood still remained caked around its edges and smeared down the limb.

Every rodentkin there, from both sides of the crystal's signal, bristled in trepidation as the temperatures around them, on both sides of the crystal, suddenly plummeted several degrees. The fairy had gone still, her face as stoic as stone, but her eyes were as sharp as daggers and hot as fire; her very pupils had narrowed from their natural round state to perfect slits, making them resemble the eyes of a reptile. Auntie Shrew and the furlings wisely scooted away from her as her skin started to glow a hot red in color.

“Who…” She outrighted snarled, her teeth sharp and bared as she spoke. *“…who did* that *to you?”*

Spyro turned his head to glance down at the former wound before lifted his left hand-paw off the ground and wiped the blood from it. ***“It was the leader of the patrol.”*** He told her. ***“He wielded a Damascus blade.”***

Zoe’s eyes widened. *“How?!”* She asked, planting her hands on the table with another rattling of dishes. *“The Rodentkin have neither the knowledge nor the technology to forge Damascus steel!”*

“Actually, I can answer that.” Isabella said, raising a paw to get her attention. “That blade is a family heirloom that’s been passed down for generations.” She then gave a humorless laugh, looking annoyed. “Funny story, in a way: the official tale is that my ancestor claimed that blade off a skaven warlord they defeated in single combat, but the truth is that his men merely found it in the human ruins, and he claimed it for himself…pathetic, really.”

Spyro turned his head to look at her. ***“I’m glad you brought that story up, as I’ve been wanting to talk to you about these ‘Skaven’ you speak of.”*** He told her.

“Spyro…” Zoe said in a concerned tone, the angry glow of her skin fading back to its original color and her pupils returning to their natural shape.

“We can deal with Jenner when the time comes.” Spyro assured her. ***“Right now, I feel that the skaven are a more important topic.”***

Isabella nodded. “You’re not wrong about that…” She stated. “…well, what do you want to know?”

“You said earlier that the bandits that attacked you weren’t skaven, is that correct?” Spyro asked.

“Yes, I am completely confident that they were common rodentkin.” Isabella confirmed.

“How do you figure?”

The princess blinked before smiling.

“Four reasons.” She said, holding four fingers up. “Reason one: they looked like normal Rodentkin.” When Spyro cocked his head to the side in confusion, she explained: “You see how we rodentkin have human-like qualities to our face and bodies?” She asked, gesturing to her face, which indeed looked a bit like a human’s in overall shape (minus the snout, ears, and other rat features). He took notice that Elizabeth and Mr. Ages had the same kind of head-shape as well, and while Justin’s was shaped more like a normal rat’s, the human qualities were also there. He nodded. “The skaven don’t have that: they look like rats completely; feral rats that stand on two legs and wear clothing. Their eyes are also completely red; not just the irises, but the whole eye, which also glow in the dark. The bandits had none of these traits.

Reason two: they didn’t speak in the common skaven dialect. You see, skaven speak in a distinct dialect that’s known as ‘Queekish’: a dialogue that is spoken in words that are short, clipped, and often repeated several times in a row in an effort to add emphasis to statements. Like this:” She coughed into her fist to clear her throat. “Ahem…*Greetings, yes-yes. Isabella-name, that is. Pleasure-nice to meet meet you, Spyro-thing.*” She spoke in a quick voice that rasped like snakeskin against cobblestone. Spyro blanched a little at how her voice sounded, crooning in confusion, while the Brisby children all laughed. Isabella allowed herself a smile, though it was a bit strained from embarrassment. “None of the bandits talked in Queekish at all…they weren’t even subtle about it.” She commented, looking a bit insulted. “Honestly, if they were *truly* trying to fool anyone, then they were laughably bad at it.”

“I don’t think they had to act when there were going to be no witnesses.” Justin stated. “All they had to do was leave evidence for us to find and frame the skaven with.”

“That’s true.” Isabella agreed. “Anyway, Reason three: I distinctly remember seeing female bandits amongst those who attacked us. You see, female skaven-” She suddenly stopped and looked over at the Speaking

Crystal, from which the Brisby children were all watching intently. "… actually, I'm not sure I should talk about it in front of the kids."

"Agreed." Mr. Ages said simply.

Auntie Shrew picked up on the hint. "In that case, let's be off, children." She said to Teresa, Martin, and Cynthia, ushering them to leave.

All three of them groaned. "Aww, but *whyyyy*?" Martin whined, even as the shrew continued to push them along.

"Because the adults are talking and young furlings like yourselves don't need to hear it." Auntie Shrew stated flatly. "Now come, come. We have chores to finish."

The kids all whined in protest but ultimately let themselves be ushered out by their aunt, leaving Zoe as the only one on the other end of the Speaking Crystal. Once everyone was sure they were gone from hearing range, Isabella continued. "As I was saying, female skaven don't exist. I mean, they do have females of their species, but they aren't skaven in the same sense that the males are." The princess gave a disgusted look. "Rat Mothers, they call them: giant, deformed monstrosities that only exist to be brood-mothers: to be bred and produce countless young. They're not even *aware* of their own existence, due to their mutated brains and all the drugs the skaven keep them on; they're nothing more than animals that they mate with rather than butcher…and even *that's* not out of the picture, should food be scarce enough."

That…was *beyond* horrific, Spyro ultimately decided, though his saurian face was incapable of showing it. But judging from the looks on everyone else's faces, the feeling was unanimous.

Then Zoe gave an amused smirk. *"You sent the kids away, so they didn't have to hear that horror…and yet you spilled it all to Spyro, who is a child himself?"*

Isabella eyes widened comically. "Wait, he is?!" She squeaked.

“Yep. About the same age as Teresa, if not a little younger.” The fairy confirmed.

Mr. Ages looked just as alarmed as Isabella. “That young, and already *this* size?!”

“Oh yeah. Safi’jiiva are one of the largest dragon species in all the realms, at least of those not of the Titan category.” Zoe answered him, interlacing her fingers together to prop her chin up. *“He’ll be* three times *his current size once he’s fully grown. Bigger than a Nimh Bear.”*

Mr. Ages gave Spyro a dumbfounded look, struggling to wrap his head around the knowledge that he had just received. Isabella, meanwhile, had gone completely red in the face with embarrassment, mortified with herself for what she had told him; even if he was mature for a child his age, there were just certain things you don’t openly talk to children about!

“It’s fine.” The dragon assured her, lifting a hand-paw to wave it off. ***“I’m more than familiar with how creatures reproduce. This is nothing new to me.”***

Elizabeth was the one to look mortified at that. “That just makes it *worse*!” She exclaimed. “Experienced or not, you’re still just a child! There are just things too mature for young minds to take in!”

Spyro cocked his head to the side; an act that she knew meant he didn’t understand. ***“Why are* you *upset? Didn’t you mate with Johnathan to make your own children?”*** He asked with a completely straight face.

Now it was Elizabeth’s turn to turn bright red, her face lighting up all the way to her ears, her eyes wide as dinner plates. She heard Justin trying (and failing) to keep from laughing, his snickering poorly hidden behind one fist, while Isabella was fighting to keep her giggles from getting too loud, hiding her smile behind a hand. Mr. Ages merely rolled his eyes, not showing any signs he was amused by the whole thing. Zoe, meanwhile, didn’t even attempt to hide it, her laughter carrying all the way from the other side of the Speaking Crystal, which had fallen from the mouse's trembling fingers and landed in her lap.

“*T-T-That’s besides the point!*” She stammered, trying to hide her blushing face from the others with her hands. “C-Can we just go back to what we were originally talking about, please?!”

“S-Sure, sure.” Isabella giggled, coughing into her fist to clear herself of any remaining humor. “Reason Four, and perhaps the simplest reason of all of them: no warpstone.”

Spyro visibly recoiled a bit at those words, an instinctual growl rumbling from between his teeth. ***“Warpstone?!”*** He telepathically barked in alarm. ***“The Skaven use warpstone?!”***

“You’re familiar with it, then?” Isabella asked.

“Warpstone and its dangers were part of my arcanial education during my younger years.” The dragon growled, eyes glowing with his inner fire as the images of the glowing green crystal-like rocks formed in his mind’s eye. ***“Chaos Magic condensed into a physical form; a dark mineral that corrupts everything it touches, both physically and mentally. I was warned never to get involved with it,*** **despite** ***Dragonkind’s natural immunity.”***

“You were warned wisely.” Mr. Ages stated simply. “It *is* true that dragons are immune to warpstone’s corruptive effects, but that itself doesn’t fully negate to risk of it harming the very world around them.”

“The skaven have a natural resistance to warpstone. Not complete immunity like dragons have, but enough of a resistance to justify their collection of it.” Isabella continued to explain, her own expression one of dark disgust. “They are *obsessed* with it, and use it for everything: their magic, their technology, their experiments, as currency, even as a narcotic at times.” She scoffed. “They claim it to be a gift from the gods…or more precisely, their own twisted chaos god: the Great Horned Rat.”

Spyro was unfamiliar with that particular god, but he knew the dangers that the Chaos Gods once imposed upon all of reality. If this ‘Great Horned Rat’ was a chaos god, then he must be bad news…and from everything he had heard so far, the skaven were not far behind, if not already on par with their god in terms of vile wickedness.

Another potential foe to face down the line.

"Tanya was insistent that the bandits were skaven." He told Isabella, turning his head to look directly at her. ***"She told me the skaven were once rodentkin criminals who were banished to a place called the Isle of Exile, who changed after making a deal with some 'unspoken one'…in this unspoken one the Great Horned Rat?"***

Isabella blinked. "What? No, of course not. The unspoken one is…" She hesitated, unsure of what was permissible to say. "…i-is *someone else*…" She shook her head. "No, the Skaven are not former rodentkin. They are rat men from *outside* of Nimh: talking rats that came before us. What Tanya told you is the story that most rodentkin believe to be the truth…" She then got a contemplative look on her face, stroking her chin in thought. "…That being said, the bandits *did* say they were going to take us 'back to Exile'; where the skaven have built their clan."

"You think they might've been slaves?" Justin suggested.

"Either that, or a group of bandits foolish enough to work for the skaven." The princess concluded. "Either one would explain how they got the blade in the first place."

"That doesn't change the fact that these bandits were working under the orders of someone within the empire's higher-ups." Zoe stated, folding her arms. *"You are being* targeted*, princess, and I highly doubt this setback will discourage them from further attempts on your life."*

"Why would anyone want to target you?" Spyro asked.

Mr. Ages sighed. "Because she's to inherit the throne by the end of the year."

Elizabeth looked surprised. "Wait, what?! *Why*?! Did something happen to Nicodemus?!" She asked fretfully.

"No, no. Grandfather is fine." Isabella assured her. "He's just decided to retire for the rest of the century."

Zoe blinked in surprise. *"For the rest of the century?"*

Justin nodded. "Every century or so, Nicodemus steps down from the throne to take a break from ruling the empire. When he does, he chooses one of his descendants to rule in his stead."

Zoe rubbed the side of her head in surprise. *"So, the rumors are* true*, then; King Nicodemus* is *immortal."*

"Well, he's certainly long lived, but I wouldn't say *immortal*." Mr. Ages stated. "Princess Isabella is his only direct descendant this time around, so the throne would be hers to inherit…but there's a problem."

"What would that be?"

Isabella sighed, resting her head against one of her propped-up hands. "I'm a doe."

To that, Spyro cocked his head to the side in confusion. ***"What does being female have to do with it?"***

"It is against the laws of the rats for a doe to take on the king's crown." The irritated princess grumbled. "It was a law made before grandfather united the empire under one flag, and one that both the council and the nobility have been fighting all his efforts to get rid of." She sighed heavily. "Ignorant, misogynistic pigs, the lot of them…"

If Spyro had the ability to frown, he would've done so; instead, he simply narrowed his eyes at the thought. ***"…That doesn't make any sense."*** He muttered aloud, getting everyone's attention. ***"If one is a capable leader, and has all the skills needed to lead a kingdom proper, what does it matter if they're male or female?"***

"*Thank you*!" Isabella exclaimed as she threw her hands up in the air, startling the dragon out of his thoughts. "Someone who gets it!" She lowered her arms, letting her hands drop into her lap. "I mean, the mice have a queen in New Era City, and nobody complains about that! Sure, she's just a figurehead monarch, but still!" She gave another heavy sigh.

“…There’s one way for me to inherit the throne: I must find a suitable husband to take up the crown and become the new king…but time is against me: I *have* to marry before winter, or Jenner will inherit the crown and become the new king instead.”

Spyro blanched, a soft hiss escaping from between his jaws. The very idea of that rat becoming a king was unpleasant.

“Speaking of which, what *is* Jenner even doing here, anyway?” Isabella asked Justin.

Justin scoffed. “When Nicodemus gave us instructions to find the new Titan beast, Jenner overheard and practically demanded to bring his own squad to assist with the hunt.” He told her, no shortage of disapproval in his voice. “It meant more manpower, so Nicodemus agreed to his request.”

Then Zoe chimed in: *“You sure it wasn’t to meet up with his hired goons and get his competition out of the way?”*

The glade fell into silence at that.

“…What?” Isabella finally asked, sounding outright disturbed.

“Are you suggesting that *Jenner* is the one who hired the bandits to kill Isabella?” Mr. Ages asked, adjusting his glasses to look at the fairy with hardened eyes.

The fairy didn’t so much as twitch from the looks she was getting. *“It makes sense, does it not?”* she asked. *“Why else would he be so insistent on accompanying you on a potentially life-threatening venture? To a place that he knew his rival was going to be, far from the watchful eyes of Rosebush City?”* She looked at Isabella, who seemed to be coming to a horrible realization. *“You said it yourself, princess: the only thing between him and becoming king is you. If you’re unable to find a husband and take up the throne, the crown is his…and why would anyone of that ambition take the chance that you might succeed in that endeavor?”*

"That would explain why I found him and his men just wandering about the forest…" Spyro commented, his eyes narrowed and glowing.

"That…*doesn't* sound out of character for him." Justin admitted, frowning in thought.

The princess looked truly shaken by the idea. "B-But surely, he wouldn't go that far! I'm his *family,* for Frith's sake!"

"A brother's blade cuts deepest." Zoe stated simply. She then waved a hand, as if dismissing the thought. *"Ah, but I'm just rambling at this point. Frankly, I'm just pissed at the guy for hurting Spyro. I suppose anyone of the nobility of Rosebush City could%****@#%$@&*(%$#@?!****"***

The scrambling screeches of her voice were the only warning they got before the Speaking Crystal suddenly went haywire. The sparkling magic that made up the image suddenly fizzed out of control, small arches of mana lightning burst forth in loud, crackling sparks; Elizabeth gave a yelp of pain as the mana zapped her legs through her skirts, instinctively kicking and sending the crystal tumbling into the dirt. Everyone clambered to their feet to put distance between themselves and the frazzled crystal, which bounced and zapped about from the arches of blue-and-purple mana lightning bursting about its form. Then, after a moment of that, it stopped: the gem turned pale grey in color as the last bits of magic bled out and faded into the air, lying still in the dirt.

"…well…that was something." Justin commented.

Elizabeth cautiously approached the crystal and gave it a quick touch before pulling her hand away. It didn't shock her this time, so, hesitantly, she reached down and picked it up; it looked dull and clouded now, like a normal rock, as opposed to the once vibrant and clear crystal it had just been.

"Zoe?" She asked, a bit of dread creeping into her voice. There was no answer. She tapped the surface of the crystal three times, but nothing happened. She tried again, more urgently this time. "Zoe, can you hear me?" Again, no response.

Spyro lowered his head down towards her, to which she lifted the crystal up above her to where he could get to it more easily. He sniffed it carefully, his hot breath blowing against Elizabeth and ruffling her fur.

***"It's* dead."** He commented, sounding surprised.

"But I left it in a source of light so it could replenish itself." Elizabeth stated.

"Didn't you just see what happened?" Mr. Ages asked, stepping up to them to get a better look himself. "All the mana inside it burst out in a flurry."

"No…" Spyro said darkly, eyes locked on the now dead magical tool. ***"It didn't burst out…it was* ripped *out."*** He then looked up, lifting his head to survey the glade. ***"Something seized the mana and drained it from the crystal."***

"But what could-" Mr. Ages began before Spyro suddenly snapped his head around, towards the southern edge of the glade. He then turned bodily to face it, his long tail swinging through the air as he did so; everyone instinctively ducked as it swung overhead, even though it was too high up to actually hit them.

"Something's coming." The dragon growled.

Elizabeth was about to ask what he meant by that when they all heard it: a voice, cutting through the silence of the forest. It sounded like the voice of a male rodentkin, but something was *off* about it. It was warbled and bubbling, and it echoed in a strange manner; it was like multiple people trying to talk underwater in perfect unison. The voice continued to grow louder as its source grew closer, and eventually Spyro's keen ears were able to pick up the words…or rather, name that was being said:

"Justin…Justiiiin!"

Then the source of the voice made itself known, pushing its way out from behind the leaves of a bush lining the southern edge of the glade.

And every rodentkin there recoiled in *horror*.

It was a male rat rodentkin, the same size and height as Justin was; he was dressed in the armor of a royal guard, making him one of Justin's men…but that was the only means they had to recognize him. The rat was little more than a mummified husk at this point: his skin was taut against his bones, his skin an unnaturally dark color and his muscles atrophied beyond recovery. His veins were visible all across the skin that was exposed, glowing a sharp bright blue and pulsing with light, his sagging eyes glowing with the same magical glow. His every breath came in a tight, exhausted wheeze as he stumbled into the glade, shambling along with his bony hands reaching for the air; he looked like a zombie at this point.

"Frith above, it's Issac!" Justin exclaimed in horror.

"Captain…it comes…!!" Was all 'Issac' managed to say before he fell forward and collapsed on the ground, his armor rattling from the impact.

Justin didn't waste a second; he ran to his fallen soldier as fast as his legs would carry him. Elizabeth and Isabella looked at each other before they followed the captain as quickly as they could, hitching up their skirts to keep herself from tripping over them. Mr. Ages was the last to follow, having finished gathering up his scrolls and pencils before following, his age preventing him from going any faster than a quick hobble. Spyro waited a moment before following, his long strides allowing him to keep up with the others despite simply walking. When he reached his fallen man, Justin dropped to his knees and reached to help the man up.

"Don't touch him!" Mr. Ages shouted, halting Justin mid-reach. "He's suffering from Mana Poisoning! If you touch him, you'll be poisoned too!"

"We can't just leave him like this!" Justin objected.

"C-Captain…" The soldier known as Issac wheezed, weakly lifting his head to look up at his commanding officer. It was then, to the rest of their horror, that his skin was flaking off his body, peeling away and crumbling into ash before their very eyes.

“I’m here, Issac!” Justin told him, wanting to help but unable to. “Just hang on! We’ll get you help.”

Spyro decided not to object to that promise for the soldier’s sake; he could sense the very life-force, what little there was left, fading from his body. He would be dead soon, and there was nothing anyone could do for him now.

Issac coughed, thick blackened blood peppering the dirt. “It’s coming…you have…to leave…it’s here!”

“What are you talking about? What’s here?” Justin asked.

His answer sent a cold stab of dread through everyone:

“The Plow! It’s here!”

“*What?!*” Mr. Ages exclaimed, straightening up as if in preparation to run. “That’s *impossible*! The Plow never leaves the path!”

“It came through the trees…ran the squad over…” The dying soldier explained, even as more and more of his very flesh began to turn grey and crumble off his bones. “Drained what was left…I’m the…only one…who…made…it…”

And with that, he breathed his last, his head coming to rest on the ground. The glow of his veins and eyes faded into nothingness, and immediately after the rest of his body slowly crumbled into ash, not even leaving a skeleton behind. All that remained was his armor, which laid limply amongst the ashen pile. Elizabeth’s hand covered her mouth as she fought back the urge to cry, while Justin merely lowered his head in a mournful bow.

“We can mourn their deaths later; right now, don’t have time to waste!” Mr. Ages told them, clutching his scrolls to his chest.

Justin clenched his fists, forcing down the pain of his lost men. “You’re right.” He said, standing up. “The Plow is here. We have to evacuate Dapplewood before it’s too late!”

Elizabeth opened her mouth to say something, only for her words to devolve into an alarmed squeak as a familiar aura of purple and magenta magic enveloped her entire body, lifting her slightly off the ground. The sensation was quite unlike anything she had felt before; it was akin to being submerged completely in water, able to feel the liquid touching every inch of your skin at once, yet still being able to breathe just fine, as well as not feeling the suspension of the water beneath oneself. She looked over to see Spyro's horns glowing in the same manner they had before…when he had wrung out the bandit chief like a wet towel. She heard a cry of surprise from nearby, and she turned her head to see Isabella being seized by the same aura. It truly looked like she was floating underwater, the way her skirts billowed out and floated weightlessly.

Then something very unwelcomed happened: they were lifted up into the air.

Elizabeth bit her lip to keep the scream in her throat as she began floating upwards at a slow yet hasty speed, the ground quickly getting further away with each passing second. She squeezed her eyes shut and curled up into a ball, silently pleading to Frith that it would be over soon.

Thankfully, it was over; after a few scary seconds of being pulled away from the ground, she felt herself being set down on something familiar, and the sensation of being enveloped by magic fading. She opened her eyes to see she was on Spyro's back again, in the same place that she had ridden him before. Finally relaxed, she shifted herself until she was seated properly. Spyro, looking back at them from the corner of his eye, grunted with approval before setting Isabella down on his back as well, just behind her.

There was a bit of a fumble as her skirts draped over Elizabeth as she came down, enveloping the mouse in white petticoats; Isabella gave an embarrassed squeak and quickly pulled her skirts off of her, tucking them into her lap.

"S-Sorry!" She stammered, cheeks bright red.

"No, no! It's fine!" Elizabeth stammered as well, her own face flushed.

Spyro just gave the two a confused croon, even as they gave him looks of exasperation.

Justin jumped up onto his war-rabbit, with Mr. Ages taking a seat in front of him, and grabbed the reins of his steed. “Let’s hurry! We don’t have much time!” He told Spyro. “We have to get the villagers to safety before it comes!” He turned his rabbit in the direction of Dapplewood. “Also, whatever you do, *don’t* get too close to the Plow, or it will drain you like it did Issac! Understood?”

Spyro grunted animalistically, giving the captain a nod…though he didn’t intend to follow that advice.

He fully intended to get close to it.

So he could crush it with his coils and melt it with his breath.

He had finally found it: a home to call his very own, with people who were accepting him and all his frightening features without fear. From the Brisby family at the Lee of the Stone to the furlings of Dapplewood, and even among those from the distant Rosebush City, they had welcomed him despite his sharp teeth. Gave him the warmth he had been seeking for all these years. Finally rid him of the Tight Emptiness inside his chest. Welcomed him into their land.

He was *home*. And he had no intention of losing it now.

This Plow would fall this day. And with its fall, he would show the world what happened to those who dared to try and take his home from him. A warning so grand and permanent that would forever echo as a monument to his power and will.

To the wrath of Jendovahzoor.

Notes:

A/N: Merry Christmas!!